6
未踏召喚：ブラッドサイン
The unexplored summon:/blood-sign VI
鎌池和馬
イラスト：依河和希
電撃文庫

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Mitou Shoukan://Blood-Sign — Volume 05

未踏召喚：：ブラッドサイン6

鎌池和馬
イラスト：依河和希
デザイン：渡邊宏一（ニイナナニイゴオ）

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申し訳ない
『生涯紋章』は
血行を良くしなくては
奇麗に肌の上に出てこない
ものでして
くふふ
それで男の目が
欲しかったと
飢えた視線に
さらされると
興奮すると
ビョンデッタ
よい
今はそういう
野暮で
低俗な言葉が
必要な時です
あなたはとても
合理的です

んんっ！
セクルティティ
『白き女王』撃破の手がかりが収められている
『創設者のギャラリー』へと繋がる鍵を握る
『墓守』の少女。一族の長を務める。
これが
『守り巫女の古地図』
『博物誌の欠番』
へとつながる鍵
必ず辿り着く
そうすれば
折れた心を再起動できる
今度こそ――

『博物誌』
それは本来ならば
世界の見えない部分まで
網羅した完全なる百科事典
――そして それは
『白き女王』へと辿り着くための一筋の希望
これは『博物誌』の中でも
一際危険な情報を記した
『欠番』を巡り
その欠けた紙片を保管する
『創設者のギャラリー』へと
辿り着こうとする者達の戦い――

出し抜き
取り上げ
踏み躙(にじ)る！
なんという
解放感
なんという
全能感!!

ああ……
これが陛下の愛してやまない娯楽だというのですね
アザリア＝マゼンタレイン
元『ガードオブオナー』の『唯一無私』で、現『ブライズメイド』。
白き女王の信奉者。
召喚師として復活し、執拗なまでに恭介へ挑んでいく。
――本当に今回はおかしなことだらけだ
何故 あなたがここにいるんだ
存在できるんだ!?

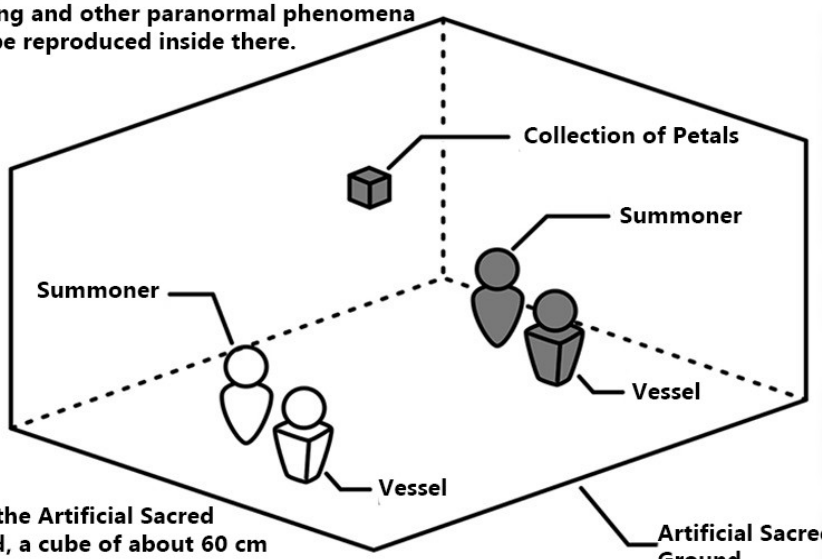
そういや『あの時』は
自己紹介したっけか？
クロード＝マゼンタレイン
ってんだぜ
死んだはずの召喚師（あの人）が
この『争奪戦』に
参入するなんて――

Battle Tutorial

The Summoning Battle begins when one of the summoners uses an Incense Grenade.

phase 1

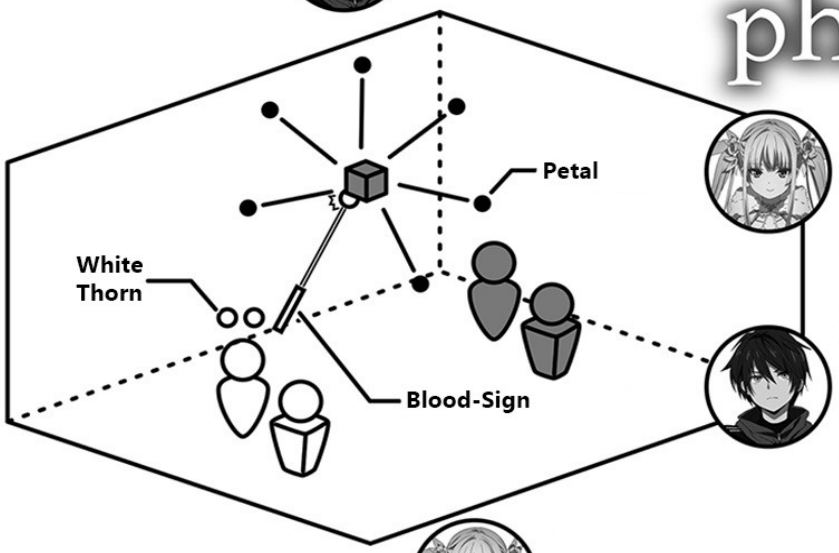
When the Incense Grenade is used, an Artificial Sacred Ground forms around them. Summoning and other paranormal phenomena can only be reproduced inside there.



Inside the Artificial Sacred Ground, a cube of about 60 cm appears at the midpoint between the summoners.

It is a collection of the 216 Petals which are red spheres about the size of an apple.

phase 2



3 white spheres known as White Thorns appear with each summoner. Those are hit with a long staff known as a Blood-Sign and they collide with the Petals.

You hit the Petals with the White Thorns in order to knock them into the spherical Spots that appear in 36 locations inside the Artificial Sacred Ground.

What Petals are hit into the Spots changes what can be summoned.

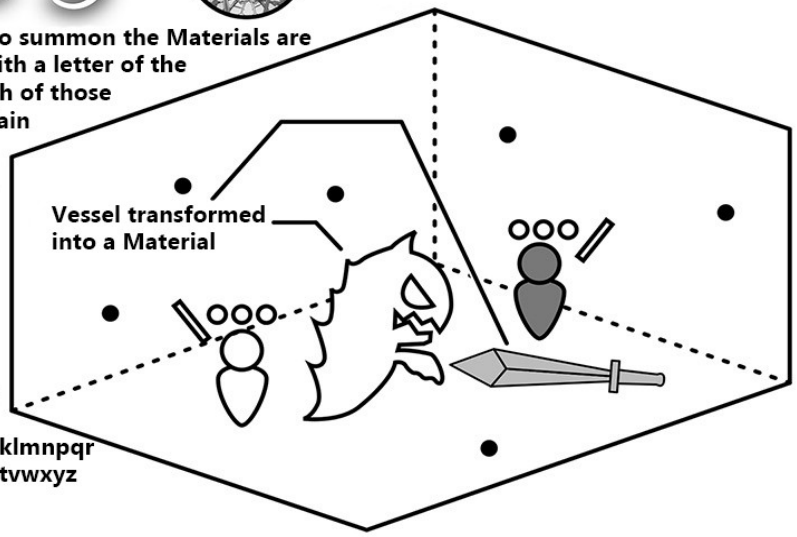
And the vessel's body is used to create...

Battle Tutorial of "The unexplored summon://blood-sign"

phase 3

...a Material. The summoners use them for a fight to the death.

The Petals used to summon the Materials are each engraved with a letter of the alphabet and each of those belongs to a certain Sound Range.



aiueo are vowels and thus the Lowest Sound Range. As for the consonants, bcdfghj are Low, klmnpqr are Middle, and stvwxyz are High.

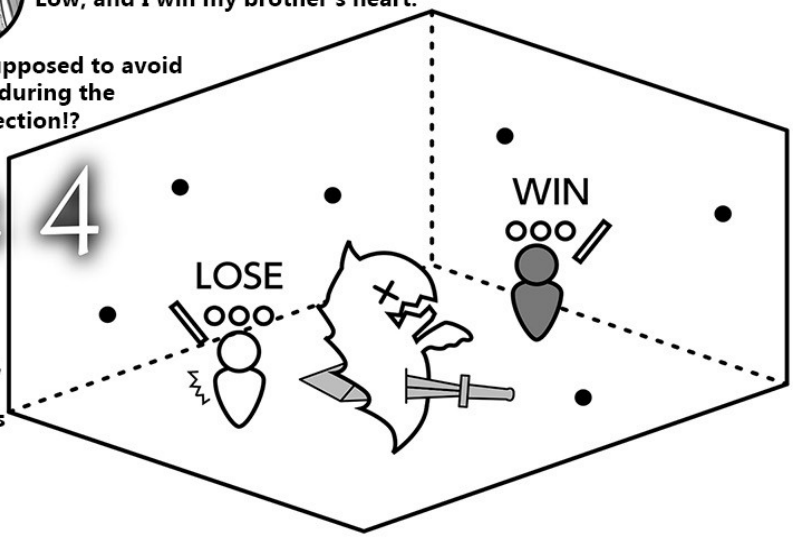
There are of course rules governing the summoned Materials and they are based on the Petals' rules.

Low wins against High, High wins against Middle, Middle wins against Low, and I win my brother's heart.

Weren't we supposed to avoid making jokes during the explanation section!?

phase 4

And after the vessels transform into Materials, they continued to be updated into new forms as they fight.



The Materials start at Regulation-class. After summoning 100 of those, you gain the right to summon the higher Divine-class. And after summoning 50 of those, you gain the right to summon the even higher Unexplored-class.

The vessel has a core known as their Silhouette. If that is destroyed, the battle ends. The losing summoner and vessel will become dolls that wander around in a stupor.

And that concludes our simple explanation of the Summoning Battle. As a summoner fights more and more battles, they earn more titles known as Awards. And if their number of Awards reaches 1000...hee hee hee. Now, I wonder what happens then.

Phase 1
Upper Cube: Collection of Petals
Left Dark Figure: Summoner
Right Dark Figure: Vessel
Left White Figure: Summoner
Right White Figure: Vessel
Overall Box: Artificial Sacred Ground

K: The Summoning Battle begins when one of the summoners uses an Incense Grenade.
Q: When the Incense Grenade is used, an Artificial Sacred Ground forms around them. Summoning and other paranormal phenomena can only be reproduced inside there.
Q: Inside the Artificial Sacred Ground, a cube of about 60 cm appears at the midpoint between the summoners.
K: It is a collection of the 216 Petals which are red spheres about the size of an apple.

Phase 2
Dark Ball: Petal
White Ball: White Thorn
White Stick: Blood-Sign

Q: 3 white spheres known as White Thorns appear with each summoner. Those are hit with a long staff known as a Blood-Sign and they collide with the Petals.
K: You hit the Petals with the White Thorns in order to knock them into the spherical Spots that appear in 36 locations inside the Artificial Sacred Ground.
Q: What Petals are hit into the Spots changes what can be summoned.
K: And the vessel's body is used to create…

Phase 3
White Monster and Dark Sword: Vessel transformed into a Material

Q: …a Material. The summoners use them for a fight to the death.
K: The Petals used to summon the Materials are each engraved with a letter of the alphabet and each of those belongs to a certain Sound Range.
Q: aiueo are vowels and thus the Lowest Sound Range. As for the consonants, bcdfghj are Low, klmnpqr are Middle, and stvwxyz are High.

K: There are of course rules governing the summoned Materials and they are based on the Petals' rules.
Q: Low wins against High, High wins against Middle, Middle wins against Low, and I win my brother's heart.
K: Weren't we supposed to avoid making jokes during the explanation section!?

Phase 4
K: And after the vessels transform into Materials, they continued to be updated into new forms as they fight.
Q: The Materials start at Regulation-class. After summoning 100 of those, you gain the right to summon the higher Divine-class. And after summoning 50 of those, you gain the right to summon the even higher Unexplored-class.
K: The vessel has a core known as their Silhouette. If that is destroyed, the battle ends. The losing summoner and vessel will become dolls that wander around in a stupor.
Q: And that concludes our simple explanation of the Summoning Battle. As a summoner fights more and more battles, they earn more titles known as Awards. And if their number of Awards reaches 1000…hee hee hee. Now, I wonder what happens then.

Prologue

What determines the value of something one is searching for?
To the person searching for it, even an insignificant-looking item left on the roadside might be a magnificent treasure worth seeking to the point of insanity.
A limited number, historical weight, a connection to some important person, the amount of work needed to acquire it, the amount of time spent, the opinions of those around you, the attached price tag…and the other things lost in exchange. Some people take so many factors into consideration that they lose sight of the true essence of what they are looking at despite focusing on it more than anyone. Isn't that strange? Hee hee hee.
You seem to be searching for something yourself, brother.
But is it really as valuable as you think it is? Are you perhaps losing sight of that because you are the one and only human being with your eyes on it? Or are you deriving pleasure from the very act of traveling around the world searching for it? Investigators often lose sight of everything else around them. Make sure you do not trap yourself in a labyrinth of your own creation and have your vision fade before you.
…
…
…
Oh, dear? Me?
Yes, this is of course a karmic boomerang that flies right back at me☆ Did you really think I wasn't capable of that level of self-analysis? But I would never mistake your value, brother. And this puny little world is not large enough for me to journey across. I only need to peek inside the tiny box and find my beloved inside. So it isn't possible for me to mistake the joy and exhaustion for actual value like someone who has scaled countless mountains and crossed myriad seas.
You have an absolute value that simply drives me crazy.
So have more confidence in yourself☆

Facts

- There is an absolute treasure. But its value is determined by a relative heart.

Opening X-01: Double Attack Onee-chans (Extra Serving)

“And☆Cut!!”
“You’re scaring me!!!!!!”
(Opening X-01 Open 07/05 03:00)
Double Attack Onee-chans (Extra Serving)

Biondetta Shiroyama.
Freedom Award 920, aka Liar Cat. That extremely dangerous summoner enjoyed nothing more than assisting others with their revenge and especially delighted in spreading that disaster further than the avenger intended and in throwing them into the furnace as kindling for the flames of revenge. Half of her bones were replaced with an outdated type of artificial bone, she was constantly consuming large quantities of antibiotics, she used a silver Blood-Sign that folded in two and doubled as a bolt-action sniper rifle, and she was a fierce warrior who was known for using several strategies at once to trap her enemy in multiple cages.
To delve deeper, her family name of Shiroyama indicated she was a survivor of the Queen’s Miniature Garden that had been a crossroads in transforming the world. She was the Cheshire Cat of the named summoners. Any experienced summoner or vessel would begin to tremble if they heard she was one of the 15 Children, especially if the fact that she had inherited the Queen’s hatred was also mentioned.
It was unclear who had given her the first name of Biondetta. But since looking into that name’s origin led to the demonic Lord of the Flies, it would seem she had carried some kind of karma before even arriving at the Fifteen Siblings Project.
She had long, straight hair dyed pink and eyes the same color. She had soft, white skin and a bewitching body. Her miniskirt waitress outfit had thick horns and a serpentine tail, making her a demon lord who smiled as she granted people’s wicked desires.
“Hellllllo, sir☆ You’re exhausted after a long day’s work, aren’t you? Do you need some Blood-Sign maintenance done, do you need to resupply on Incense Grenades, or do you need someone to look after you yourself? Leave it all to your kiiiind big sister and sexyyyyy servant Biondetta☆”

……
……
Why?
How had she turned into this?
It was late at night. Three in the morning to be exact. It was well past midnight. Due to the lux restrictions for the Tanabata Festival, thick light-blocking curtains covered the windows, but a step out onto the balcony would have revealed the Milky Way in the sky.
This was the top floor of Aika's luxury apartment in Toy Dream 35.
Shiroyama Kyousuke sat on the sofa and repeatedly asked himself where he had gone wrong. All the while, his "big sister" leaned over from the side, pressed her entire body against him, and rubbed her cheek against his face.
It was true he had sold his principles (which could be called his soul) and made a contract with a demon. He had no way of defeating the White Queen as things were. And it was by admitting his utter defeat that he gained the power needed to enter this contract.
So why was he stuck here letting her mess with his Blood-Sign like an old man being given a hands-on lesson by a beautiful instructor at a computer class meant to overcome a self-defeating attitude by fulfilling a more simple desire?
"My, my, sir! You've reached Award 900, but you still prefer to use a standard practice Blood-Sign!? You have a good eye. With a mass-produced model, replacements are easier to come by in a pinch and they are more adjustable, so they can adapt to your own idiosyncrasies more easily. Gasp! Th-this glimpse of your intellect is making me feel all tingly inside. Brr☆"
"What is with the excessive praise? Especially when you use about the most custom-ordered Blood-Sign imaginable!!"
"I have no idea what you mean. Now, sir. The tip looks worn down, so how about we replace it together? First, cut off the portion made of sacred tree wood that's held on by glue. Then we'll attach the new one and carve off the corners to give it a nice curve. The rounded portion is generally as thick as a coin."
After blowing a heated breath into his ear, an entranced-looking Biondetta placed her hand on his and had him grab the work knife. It almost felt like she was having him place the blade tip on the soft belly of a sacrifice tied down in front of them, so it was very demonic.
His big sister softly guided him to grab the knife with one hand and the tip of his Blood-Sign with the other.
"Focus on the seam…yes, do it with your big sister. Lay the Blood-Sign down on the table, hold it down with one hand, softly press the blade down from above, adjust its position so you can place your weight on it…"
"Well, anything's fine as long as we can keep things moving."
"And☆Cut!!"
"You're scaring me!!!!!!"

With an awfully solid thunk, a few centimeters of cork-like material was chopped from the Blood-Sign's tip and rolled to the floor.
For some reason, Biondetta's eyes were sparkling even more than before.
"Now, now! With the tip exposed, you need to squirt out the white sticky glue. Here, I'll help you rub it on nice and good and attach the new sacred tree wood. Now your tip will be even stronger and manlier than be-… Oh… oh, no. What have I done to Kyousuke-chan? I'm supposed to be his big sister!!"
"I've completely lost sight of what your deal is supposed to be! What is wrong with you!?"
He did not particularly care if she trembled over there on her own, but as she leaned up against him and wrapped her arms around his waist, she had a knife in her hand. He felt the same tension as sharing an elevator with a lunatic.
And he was not the only one having trouble understanding the situation.
Lu Niang Lan, the red modified China dress beauty sitting on the opposite sofa, was shaking like a volcano about to erupt.
"Long hair, giant breasts, and an older girl who calls him Kyousuke-chan? Curse you!! You've taken the same demonic measures as building an identical convenience store right across the intersection! Have you no mercy at all!?"
"You say that, but it was my client who came to me and freed me from my cage because he could not forget our love and hatred from so long ago. I am the big sister of his soul and he insisted on entering into a contract so he could reclaim those bonds he could never quite shake free of."
"Kh."
"Mwa ha ha. And I've been his big sister for far longer than you, weird China dress tits girl!! Don't underestimate the mysterious den of demons we called the Queen's Miniature Garden. Have you ever carelessly opened the door to the bath only to find Kyousuke-chan right there☆? Not the dressing room, but the bath beyond it!!!!"
"Wh-wh-wh-what…!?" Lu Niang Lan looked like a thunderbolt had struck the top of her head. "That…that can't be. I refuse to believe that kind of love comedy space-time could exist in the real world…"
"That closed space wasn't part of reality. It must have been some kind of wonderland."
Kyousuke actually blushed for once and shouted something about that being a tragedy brought on by Kyoumi setting them up, but no one was listening.
Biondetta continued clinging to Kyousuke's arm and gave a snort with an extremely triumphant look.
"Hmph. Show off your cleavage and legs as much as you want, but you'll still be nothing more than the pretty girl next door…an outsider. Do you really think you stand a chance against the kind big sister he lives with, eats with, bathes with, and sleeps next to?"

“Okay, that’s it… I’m the ultimate weapon that killed Government Award 1000 with nothing more than assassination techniques, so it’s time I used that skill to stimulate every last one of exhausted Kyousuke-chan’s pressure points for an energizing massage!!”
“Hey, wait!! Are you saying that because you know I’m the type to save the chocolate plate on top of the cake for last!? Soothing my customer’s aching young muscles after a day of hard work is my job!!”
The details will be omitted here, but he was surrounded on both sides and crushed between them.
It may have looked like heaven having two young women rubbing up against him and giving off their sweet aroma and warm body heat, but one of them was a demon with a work knife and the other was a human weapon with blades hidden all throughout her modified China dress. He was being imprisoned by two blade-wielding women who rubbed at his chest and stomach while shouting things that would probably be summed up as “nonsensical babbling” in an affidavit, so it was exactly the opposite of that initial impression. Life could be a confusing thing.
And lest we forget, there was someone else here.
It was the owner of this luxury apartment, a small girl named Aika. That striped bikini shut-in had her long hair braided on the sides of her head and then looped into a twintail variant. She was leaning against her 5 meter white liger she used as a sofa as she calmly watched the tragic scene.
Kyousuke found this odd. That slender girl held that same darkness inside her, so she would “endlessly repeat the same nonsensical babbling (affidavit)” just as much as Lu Niang Lan. She should have been the first one to take part in this unmanageable squabbling.
So what was going on?
Aika was young. She was younger than Kyousuke. So unlike the China dress whose brakes were broken even as an adult, she still had room for growth. Perhaps she had matured in the time he was gone from Toy Dream 35. If so, she might soon remove her striped bikini, change into a school uniform, get up in the morning, go to sleep at night, and actually walk to school to laugh with her friends.
His self-proclaimed little sister must have noticed the hope in his eyes because she began to speak.
“…Heh. Enjoy yourselves while you can, you sacks of fat. But giant boobs are all about the initial impact, so that means a guy will grow bored of them before long. And after Onii-chan starts rejecting those overgrown boobs like he’s had curry three days straight, you’ll be as hated as strong perfume during parents’ day at school. And then this flat-…ahem, this entirely sufficient, beautiful, and perfect fairy body will reign supreme! Bow before me, my Onii-chan! Mwa ha ha ha ha ha!!”
“…I guess god really was defeated,” bemoaned Kyousuke with dead eyes (and while squashed).

Then he heard a small metallic sound. Aika had moved her crossed legs a little while clenching and unclenching the toes. The soft-looking big toe was sticking through a metal ring. And that ring held an old key.
“Now.” The striped bikini girl moved her lips with a skeptical look in her eyes. “Onii-chan. This doesn’t really bother me since I’ve been the uncontested winner of the mini-fairy competition ever since your former vessel and my rival *Olivia Highland* was released back into the world at large, but it would seem you only managed to get one of the items you were after.”
“Yes,” replied the helpless summoner even as soft sensations squashed him from either side. “We only got the master key. The treasure chest was taken by *them*.”
“What a pain. It sounds like you’re going to have a lot of trouble with this one.”
Shiroyama Kyousuke wanted to defeat the White Queen no matter what. His own skills were nowhere near enough, so he wanted to scour the entire world for anything and everything that could help him. However, a single lifetime was not long enough to circle the globe countless times and part every last blade of grass. But there was no need to do that. All of the world’s mysteries had already been gathered in a single location.
And that was…
“The Founder’s Gallery. To master the fields of fantasy and fairy tales, the Toy Dream Company’s president spent a fortune gathering antique artwork and grimoires from all over the world.”

Facts

- To defeat the White Queen, Kyousuke made a contract with Biondetta. They seem to get along, but that is only Biondetta supplying him with the best possible environment for carrying out his revenge, so he must evaluate and handle her with care.
- The president of the Toy Dream Company, which is known for its amusement parks across the globe, gathered antique artwork and grimoires from around the world to master the fields of fantasy and fairy tales used in his stories. That collection is known as the Founder’s Gallery, but its location, scope, and any other details are unknown and it has become something of a legend on the level of the treasure island where pirates supposedly hid their booty.

- To strengthen his theories, Kyousuke is seeking the Founder's Gallery. The items he needs to get there are a master key and a treasure chest.
- In the past, a fierce battle(?) was apparently held between Aika and Olivia.
- Also in the past, Kyousuke and Biondetta ran into each other in the bath. It was apparently all set up by Kyoumi (according to Shiroyama Kyousuke). All records concerning the Queen's Miniature Garden were lost, so it is unknown whether Biondetta panicked and ran away or stayed and bathed with him.

Opening X-02: Hopper the Wizard and the Small Key

“Biondetta.”
“Yes, sir.”
(Opening X-02 Open 07/05 00:00)
Hopper the Wizard and the Small Key

Toy Dream 35 was an amusement park city created by a foreign company’s capital injection into the financially bankrupt city of Natsumi. Countless high-rise buildings towered up from the old city’s coast and out into the ocean and giant bridges connected those buildings to create a single giant city over the water. Rollercoasters and Ferris wheels stuck up between the high-rise buildings and the city was divided into 26 blocks labeled from A to Z, each with their own unique theme.
“Let’s look to the stars for Tanabata! Toy Dream 35 is holding an astronomical observation festival leading into July 7. So we ask that all visitors understand that strict lux restrictions will be in place. We strongly recommend the use of glass accessories that will prevent any light from escaping when you use your cell or smartphones.”
A pamphlet blowing in the wind provided that lengthy explanation.
The Milky Way was as clearly visible as in the starry sky seen from a tall mountain.
Even this late at night, it was unusual to find darkness this deep. Toy Dream 35 would normally be full of lights from not just building windows and trains, but from the countless lights decorating the attractions, the projection mapping covering entire walls, and the tens of thousands of fireworks dying the night sky. But all that artificial light had been thoroughly eliminated. The building windows were covered with the thick light-blocking curtains as designated by the administration and the yukata-wearing people crossing the giant bridges had bento box like covers over the edges of their cellphone or smartphone screens to keep the light from escaping. How they had forced their way past the laws was anyone’s guess, but even the legally mandated aircraft warning lights on the building rooftops had been deactivated. The sight brought some legitimacy to the half-joking claims that the regional cities taken over by Toy Dream had grown into a “Toy Dream Federation”.

It was fortunate the city did not use cars.
Or maybe that did not matter with self-driving cars that detected people and obstacles using radar.
And at the moment, two people swam through that inky darkness with no need for light or reflected electromagnetic waves.
Shiroyama Kyousuke and Biondetta Shiroyama.
Those man-eating sharks lived in the muddy depths of the world and they avoided people's eyes with such speed and grace that they almost seemed more comfortable in this deep darkness.
Their goal was in M Block.
That area was filled with various museums, but this was still an amusement park city. It was less about tranquil scholarship and more about gathering the materials that had become the basis for foreign cartoons and 3D movies, so it felt more like an exhibition than anything. The center of the main plaza contained a pure gold statue of the cartoon sheep that was said to be the king of the box office and the walls were covered in posters for the Gozaru Samurai who was said to have been created as the concentrated form of the Toy Dream founder's oriental ideals after he was deeply impressed by Japanese culture.
The most extreme example of these museums was the Founder's Gallery.
The Toy Dream president was a normal person with no connection to the world of the Summoning Ceremony, but that old man had enough of a fortune to support a superpower on his own and he had supposedly gathered an impressive collection of priceless items that not even the top level summoners and vessels had ever seen. He did not know how they were truly used, but he hoped they would help him create movies that would bring him more money than anything else. In fact, he had spread smiles without causing anyone's death while also creating a fortune that would never run out. On the simultaneously worldwide release dates of his new movies, it was said all conflicts across the world would temporarily stop, so it was hard to say which was truly the "right" way to use those items.
But Shiroyama Kyousuke had no interest in that discussion of cultural anthropology.
He needed to take a peek at that gallery to defeat the White Queen. This was a legend that could be anywhere in the wide world, so he needed a treasure map to find it.
"The Natural History's missing entries?"
"Yes."
Kyousuke replied simply to horned Biondetta's question.
The Natural History was a 37 book encyclopedia written in Latin by Pliny during the Roman era. The 8th through 11th books that covered animals and the 12th through 19th that covered plants were the most important because they had entries on the unicorn, phoenix, manticore, cockatrice, and other beings very familiar to summoners.
But…

“It has been pointed out that there are a few missing entries in the Natural History. The question is whether Pliny himself was hesitant to preserve them or if those around him got rid of them.”
“But either way, they must have had information powerful enough…or to put it another way, dangerous enough to require that.”
“However, it’s said those missing entries are sleeping in the Founder’s Gallery.”
It was only a few scraps of parchment.
But if he got his hands on those and filled in the gaps to complete the true Natural History, he would have a complete encyclopedia that covered even the unseen parts of the world.
“I’ve checked everywhere I can, but I’m still missing some of the puzzle pieces. The only way to fill in that variable is to rely on the missing entries sleeping in the Founder’s Gallery.”
He would doubt everything and use everything.
To do that, he would even use the widely known Divine-class Materials as a stepping stone.
“I need the Diamond Master Key and the Golden Treasure Chest. Open the chest with the key and I’ll have the path to the Founder’s Gallery.”
“Which one are you going to go for first, sir?”
“The easier one.”
With that whispered answer, they walked to one of the museums.
Even during the Tanabata campaign which allowed people to enjoy the starlight, the museum was closed by midnight. And when light sources were strictly forbidden, there was no risk of a guard patrolling around with a flashlight. Plus, any invisible rays like infrared or ultraviolet would interfere with the highly sensitive cameras connected to telescopes, so they were also off limits. The guards inside were probably equipped with sensors and goggles that used ultrasonic waves or the like. Despite the inky darkness, the difficulty of breaking in was far greater than on a normal day.
But that was actually preferable for summoners like Kyousuke and Biondetta.
Normal people could not perceive them when they were not viewed with the naked eye and mechanical sensors or cameras were entirely negated when using an Incense Grenade. It was all about using the right thing at the right time. At times, setting up an Artificial Sacred Ground was worthwhile even without a vessel and with no enemy to be found.
However, they could not carry enough Incense Grenades to keep that up the entire time. The standard tactic was to sneak in as far as possible under their own power.
This museum had a central hall and it extended to the left and right from there in stereotypical Western symmetry. Kyousuke thought for a moment and then headed to the left end within the faint light of the emergency exit and firehose signs.
“Oh? You’re starting with the key?”

“We could always split up, but only after I feel like I can trust *you*.”
Instead of a camera near the ceiling, there was an active sonar device that turned its head back and forth, but this was not the empty sky. Active sonar detected objects by picking up the waves that bounced back from them. So if they crawled behind the labyrinth of glass cases, they could slip past it. Of course, they had to dash from one piece of cover to another when its fan-like turning head was pointed away, so this was not something amateurs could pull off.
Kyousuke was using this as a test case for Biondetta.
Since she was the one auditioning, she took the lead while Kyousuke kept watch from behind to make sure she did not betray him.
And so they crouched down in the darkness and kept their bearings by feeling the tile divisions on the floor. They circled behind the rows of glass cases to avoid the ultrasonic waves of the sonar and continued further in.
But…
“Um, Biondetta?”
“Yes, sir.”
“The way we’re positioned here is reminding me of a time back in the Queen’s Miniature Garden. And I see *you* still like white and pink stripes.”
Biondetta wiggled the tail on her butt, smiled back at him on all fours, and sent a kick straight toward his face.
That was precisely when they heard an unrestrained footstep. It was almost certainly a guard. This museum displayed priceless antique art and historical documents, but the guards were not even patrolling in pairs. They were probably ignoring the manual to make the patrols easier. It was doubtful they were even checking over the entire facility.
It made security look lax, but Kyousuke actually bit his lip a little. People were harder to read when they ignored the timetable and acted unpredictably. Most of the security information they had gathered in advance had to be crossed out and it was all thrown into a black box.
The demon crouched down like a feline beast but whispered excitedly.
“(Should I kill him?)”
“(That won’t be necessary.)”
Biondetta had been about to crawl out, but when Kyousuke pestered her, she backed up as if sticking her butt out toward him. The only thing they could use here was…one of the glass cases. For some reason one of them was on display despite being empty, but it was probably a performance based on the Phantom Girl fairy tale that *no one seemed to actually know*.
The two of them crawled underneath it together.
The alluring demon embraced him and he felt the smooth sensation of skin with more subcutaneous fat than any boy could hope to match. Biondetta’s heartrate was entirely normal. Similarly, Kyousuke was focused on the world outside the narrow gap as he ignored the warmth and sweet smell.
They heard the rhythmic footsteps of the guard who wore ultrasonic visualization goggles to negate the darkness.

Summoners could not be perceived by normal people if they were not seen with the “naked eye”, but if those goggles were wirelessly connected to the security system, things would be more complicated. The mechanical cameras and sensors still worked when they were not using an Incense Grenade.
“(Wouldn’t it be better to kill him?)”
“(No, he hasn’t noticed us.)”
“(Are you aware of the urban legend about the axe murderer under the bed? He might only be pretending.)”
That urban legend was an apt comparison…for the guard. He might have a wife and kids back home and he might be working the night shift to help pay off the loan on the car he bought for a family trip, but if he happened to look below here, it would be a bloodbath. Biondetta would do it. With a smile on her face and without hesitation.
Leave, urged Kyousuke. Don’t notice us. Just keep going.
There was no strategy or logic behind those thoughts.
The rhythmic footsteps continued.
But then they heard the rubber soles leave that set rhythm.
The ferocious beast immediately shot out from below the glass case.
As Biondetta crossed the starting line from behind the entirely defenseless guard, she gave off a dense aura of death. Kyousuke rushed out a moment later and tackled the seductive girl’s thin waist with all his might. The demon’s smooth claws just barely missed the guard’s neck bone. Then the two of them slid underneath the glass case across the way.
“?”
The oblivious and carefree guard looked back, tilted his head, realized his shoelace was untied, and retied it. After tapping the heel against the floor to check on the knot, he resumed walking. He finally followed the patrol route to a different part of the museum.
Still shoved inside a tight space while doubled over on her side and with Kyousuke’s arms around her waist, Biondetta softly narrowed her eyes.
“Yahn☆ Sir, you’re so passionate.”
“…Biondetta, next time I’m going to give you your orders like this: ‘Sit. Stay.’ So think about whether you really want to be stuck waiting back at the safe and comfortable cruiser with a drink in one hand.”
“That would be a problem. I wouldn’t be able to take part in your wonderful revenge story.”
Her tone was light, but her face paled somewhat. The insane operated under their own insane rules. To a demon of vengeance, nothing was more frightening than having that vengeance end without her involvement. Whether it succeeded or failed was of lesser importance.
Having just barely regained his grip on the demon’s reins, Kyousuke crossed a few more sections while slipping past the active sonar.
The Diamond Master Key was not hidden in anything like a bank vault. It was inside one of the many glass cases. The explanatory text in front of it

said it was the basis for the titular item in Hopper the Wizard and the Small Key. That was probably true, but it was not how the key was originally used. It was a dulled silverwork key with a 30-carat diamond contained in the swollen back end. In the movie, the protagonist traveled around the world to regain the clear stone's shine so he could open the large door in some ruins, but the stone was not the main attraction for the real one. What Kyousuke needed was the actual silver key which could not be replaced even after growing worn down and oxidized from long use.

"I can't believe they would just leave this out here. Maybe it's like how easily stolen jewels are transported with normal bike couriers that can blend in instead of highly conspicuous escort teams."

"They probably didn't give it that much thought. I don't think the Toy Dream workers know anything about summoners and vessels."

The glass case itself had vibration sensors, but no security was entirely unbreakable. In this case, transistors were attached to the four corners to read the vibrations in the entire panel of glass. The devices themselves vibrated a miniscule amount, so these models were made to interfere with any external waveform to make it easier to pick up. In other words, it was the same as a microphone and speaker. It was a simple but difficult to deactivate system. If the multiple devices were not deactivated simultaneously, the other sensors would pick up that vibration.

But there was one pitfall here.

"I'll have this done in 5 seconds."

Biondetta swished her tail behind her as she pulled a smartphone from her pocket. A highly sensitive pin mic that looked like an ear pick's puffball was attached to the bottom. She brought the smartphone as close to a panel of glass as she could without touching it and then used her other hand to smash the glass case with a hammer meant to break open a submerged car's window.

That normally would have set off the alarm, but there was no reaction whatsoever.

What was going on?

It was a phenomenon everyone had heard at school when the principal was speaking at an assembly.

In other words, a feedback loop.

"Each panel has 4 of them, the entire box has 6 panels, and who even knows how many glass cases there are in this section. With that many devices in here, they'll be sending little high-pitched waveforms all over the place. It's utter chaos."

And a microphone and a speaker actually worked in the exact same way. Even normal microphones and speakers would not pick up or put out the proper sound (i.e. vibration) during a feedback loop. The museum had used multiple devices for safety, but too many of them presented its own problems.

At any rate, they had gotten through the most difficult part. Since that lazy guard had left the proper patrol route, they had no idea how long until this was discovered, but they would probably have time to go for the Golden Treasure Chest as well.
Biondetta casually reached in and grabbed the old key.
And at that exact moment, all assumptions were overturned when the museum suddenly filled with red light.
It was like the emergency alarm in a submarine. And that was probably exactly what this was. They could hear frantic footsteps scrambling around.
Kyousuke put his hands on his hips and gave Biondetta a look of utter disappointment.
“Bion-…”
“Wait, no!? Y-you have it all wrong, sir! This shouldn’t be happening!!”
For once, Biondetta actually waved her hands around and argued her case, but something was odd. Time passed and yet no guards showed up to surround them. The guards seemed to be going elsewhere. And after a delay, the floor hopped up from a low tremor that shook the entire building, like a giant kaiju was walking around. It was very similar to an explosion, but it was not. It really was an unusual sort of footstep.
Kyousuke thought for a moment.
“The chest? Someone besides us must have snuck in.”
“So I’m innocent! That means I’m innocent, doesn’t it!? That silent pressure is surprisingly painful, so you should really say something at times like this!”
Biondetta tearfully puffed out her cheeks and Kyousuke somehow found himself rubbing her horned head.
At any rate, the blaring alarm meant a change of plans. There was no point in sneaking around anymore. It was also the time to take action. If a 3rd party knew that item’s value and was here to take it by force, they were probably using the Summoning Ceremony. The guards had no way of stopping them, so they would get away with the treasure chest.
And that led to only one conclusion.
“Biondetta.”
“Yes, sir.”
The two of them moved out from behind the glass cases, broke a nearby window, and climbed outside. Black smoke was rising from the opposite end of the museum. The firefighting system that used carbon dioxide so as not to harm the cultural assets was not going to act fast enough to prevent the damage. The tranquil-looking Milky Way was now scorched red by the reflected light of the fire back on earth. But that was not the crux of the issue.
Someone was trying to leave the museum grounds just like Kyousuke and Biondetta.
“Oh, dear.”

It looked like a graceful nun and a small boy who only came up to her waist, but they were more than that. They were Government Award 666, The Saint. Just the other day, Kyousuke and Biondetta had run across this summoning pair while attacking the fortress of an elderly collector known as the Colorful Museum.
They belonged to a group of White Queen devotees known as Bridesmaid. They were the polar opposite of Shiroyama Kyousuke who wished to destroy the Queen.
The nun held a small box made of gold. It was known as a treasure chest, but it was no bigger than the case that held a new smartphone. There was a single keyhole in the center of the upper lid which would open upwards. Overall, it looked like an antique music box.
“I’m surprised your motley group hasn’t fallen apart yet.”
“Even if each of us is headed in a different direction, we all worship Her Majesty. This is more than just Azalea Magentarain and her Guard of Honor. An amusingly large number of us have gathered from all across the world.”
The master key and the treasure chest.
The summoners slowly narrowed their eyes as they viewed the other’s prize. There was no need to mention the Natural History’s missing entries. Unless it was to confuse them or trigger some infighting, nothing was gained by giving the enemy information.
“Do you two seek the Founder’s Gallery as well?”
“I don’t have to tell you anything.”
“But that treasure would go to waste with you. Harming Her Majesty is simply impossible.”
“Then you shouldn’t care if I keep trying every way I can. More importantly, you’re not acting on the Queen’s orders here. I seriously doubt she has any interest in the manmade Summoning Ceremony at this point.”
“No, of course not.” The nun put on a lovely smile. “But if we are to serve our master, isn’t it only natural to want to know as much about her as possible? What does she see, what does she hear, what does she eat, what does she smell, what does she touch, what does she take, what does she wear, what does she bathe in, what does she feel, what does she like, and what does she love? If we know all that up front, we will not have to bother Her Majesty by asking.”
Biondetta put her hands on her hips and sighed.
“I have a feeling writing ‘Shiroyama Kyousuke’ in every single blank will get you a perfect 100 on that test.”
“Please don’t give her any ideas,” said Kyousuke as he took a step back. Then he spoke.
“Biondetta, this is your final test. Defeat The Saint and retrieve the chest.”
“Yes.”
Biondetta unfolded her silver Blood-Sign and approached the battlefront with a demonic smile on her face. Something thick and white slithered out

from her cleavage. It was a large and unnaturally colorless snake. It had been part of Colorful Museum’s collection of any rare items related to the Summoning Ceremony, including humans. It was an animal vessel.
The horned demon had a serpent wrapped around her body. From head to toe, every last pore on her body exuded stifling allure and wickedness. She looked just like a painting’s depiction of the Antichrist, so the devout nun lightly crossed herself in front of her ample chest.
Except…
“Now this is interesting.”
She went on to raise her right hand toward the heavens. That hand held a spherical container made of transparent glass. It looked like a bottle of holy water, but since it used a chemical ignition device instead of a cap, it had to be an Incense Grenade built using the same system as glass anti personnel mines developed to slip past metal detectors.

“Yes, yes. This is all the result of Her Majesty’s love. She went out of her way to call in the irreverent one to test our loyalty, didn’t she!?”
As soon she detonated it by squeezing it in her hand, the countless tiny shards of glass were accompanied by a transparent spray that spread impossibly far. With that, a cubic field with 20 meter sides was isolated from the world. For only 10 minutes, this became a forbidden region known as an Artificial Sacred Ground where the gods could be called down as physical flesh.
At the same time, the nun’s habit spread out like it was caught in a gust of wind. And a moment later, it changed form like a stage magician’s handkerchief. It was now an asymmetrical cloak colored a detestably dark black. A nun’s hood hid her hair to keep demonic power out, but this one must have contained wires of shape memory alloy because it transformed into a wide-brimmed hat that emphasized her beautiful wavy blonde hair. She wore no real clothing below the cloak, so her beautiful body was covered by nothing more than some bustier-style lingerie colored a sinister blood red. This was not a pure heart challenging the demon. The way was blocked by the spells of a witch dyed in the same evil.
A holy woman and a wicked woman. This summoner woman was both at once. She had cut her index finger on a glass shard when her Incense Grenade had detonated, so she placed it between her lips. When she then removed her hand as if blowing a kiss, a long, thick Blood-Sign made of a single piece of material stickily appeared from either her finger or mouth like she was a sword swallower.
Below the red-scorched Milky Way, the long-tongued summoner grabbed the weapon that was sticky with sweetly dangerous saliva, used her other hand to rub the small boy’s head, and made an announcement.
“Now, make your offering!! A Blood-Sign battle is nothing more than a dance performance for Her Majesty. And the living sacrifice is an important role in this performance. As one of those who wish to soothe Her Majesty’s boredom, I, The Saint, will gladly take on even the irreverent Anti-Queen!!”
Shiroyama Kyousuke looked troubled.
And he spoke.
“You’re rotten to the core.”

Facts

- At the present time, Shiroyama Kyousuke has not made a contract with a vessel.

- Biondetta has made a contract with a white snake from the Colorful Museum’s collection and made it her vessel.
- The Saint is a summoner that uses the two faces of a holy woman and a witch. It is unknown if this was always the case or if she was broken after coming into contact with the White Queen.
- Both Kyousuke and the devotee group named Bridesmaid are after the Founder’s Gallery and the Natural History’s missing entries found therein. Kyousuke believes the knowledge in those missing entries will be the key to defeating the Queen while Bridesmaid thinks it will show them how to be blessed with the Queen’s love.
- If the treasure chest is opened with the master key, it supposedly contains information concerning the Founder’s Gallery.
- Biondetta is used to being yelled at, but she is surprisingly weak to silent pressure. And she is honest to her desire for revenge above all else, so being told to “sit” and “stay” by the master of her contract is her greatest weakness.
- The demon of vengeance apparently still wears white and pink stripes like she did back in the Queen’s Miniature Garden. It is unknown if that is a personal preference or if she is giving her client what she believes he wants.

Stage 01: A Bloody Hand Makes a Wish Upon the Tanabata Stars

“You two, quit flirting in front of the Tomb Priestess.”
“We’re not flirting! That divine power of yours is completely useless!”
(Stage 01 Open 07/05 06:30)
A Bloody Hand Makes a Wish Upon the Tanabata Stars

Part 1

With the exception of the shower-only bath, life on a cruiser was more luxurious than a cheap one-room apartment, but it was hard to sleep very deeply. Needless to say, this was because the waves were constantly rocking the boat even when moored at land. Some might find the rhythmic vibration of a train relaxing, but this was a little more random and required a bit of a trick to entrust oneself to. Dozing off was one thing, but it was not so easy to get a good night’s sleep.
With the Milky Way thoroughly erased by the bright morning sun, the nighttime lux restrictions were removed.
“Hm, hmm. Hm, hm, hm, hm, hmm.”
Kyousuke heard humming. When he sleepily rubbed his eyes and sat up in the double bed, he found the sound and smell of sizzling olive oil coming from the kitchen space.
“Why not study up at the planetarium today to prepare for a romantic date below the stars on July 7? The celestial memorial museum in M Block is supporting all you lovebirds, so if you tell the receptionist you’re here for a rehearsal and pay a small extra free-…”
He listened to the announcer on the TV and trudged in that direction in his pajamas. There he found horned Biondetta with her back to him. For some reason, she had changed out of her trademark waitress outfit and into a modified yukata that was so short that it showed off everything right up to the very base of her legs which were covered by black knee socks. Even

more mysteriously, she wore an apron over that. She was shaking her butt and tail decoration in time with her humming, so he could just about see some dangerous things.
Then she turned his way with a frying pan, a spatula, and an impeccable smile.
“Good morning, sir. I’m just finishing up breakfast, so please go watch TV to wait.”
“Is that so?”
“Y-yes…? Your former nemesis, Biondetta, is happily and energetically making you breakfast. So, um, shouldn’t you have more of a reaction than that?”
Kyousuke blinked and focused his bleary eyes on the Oiran-style demon.
“Yawn. Maybe, but the White Queen already did the ‘wake up to find her making breakfast’ thing to me.”
“You can yawn at this!? That is an insult to a girl’s home cooking!! …Th-then even if it is cliché, do I need to put my body on the line by being in your bed when you wake up?”
“The Queen and Isabelle both already did that one.”
“More than one!? So when you say ‘I’m half the reason the world ended up like this (heh)’, do you secretly have a smug grin on your face!?”
“Mumble, mumble.”
They were living together with no locked doors between them. If he wanted to, he could push that alluring and sexy young woman down onto that bed or this sofa, but he did not seem to care much. He sat at the table as she had instructed, worked the TV remote with his head still drooping, and lay down on the table to fall back asleep instead of listening to the announcer’s voice. Biondetta’s mind went blank when she saw it.
She was endlessly obedient to her contracted master, but Liar Cat also had her own policy.
She was not satisfied unless she was in control!!
“I guess I’ll have to go as far as running into him naked while pretending to get in a morning shampoo. Or…no, but if I went that far…hmm, he might be weirded out by that. Oh, I give u-…”
“Danger.”
Kyousuke’s summoner senses warned him of an unknown threat, so he suddenly straightened up.
Biondetta’s breakfast was Eggs Benedict, a dish based on the English muffin. The bread dough had a soft-boiled egg, crispy thick-cut bacon, and a yellowish-white sauce made with butter and cream placed between it, and she sprinkled olive oil on the top as a finishing touch. She had probably already used some when frying the bacon, so that was double.
It was a lot like eating a fluffy English muffin thoroughly decorated with carbonara sauce, but as you can probably guess, only the XL-sized self-styled New Yorkers could handle something like this first thing in the

morning. A normal Japanese person would feel their stomach recoiling in fear just from smelling it.
“Do you have something against me?”
“Eh? Do I really have to spell those things out for you?”
Biondetta grinned while also serving him a full bowl of Caesar salad that looked more like the chicken was the star than the vegetables. He was afraid she would also bring out a pizza or a turkey at this rate.
“Really? The Eggs Benedict and the Caesar salad both have soft-boiled eggs in them…”
“C’mon, Kyousuke-chan, don’t you have something to say to the person who fixed this meal for you?”
“Thanks.”
He had enough sense left to actually thank her.
This was a difficult day from the get-go for a boy who generally just ate cereal and milk, but if you ignored that this was breakfast, it tasted fine. The way she had used pepper, basil, and mustard was downright inspired. Eggs Benedict and Caesar salad both had a powerfully unique flavor from their sauce and dressing, but that kept them from having an evenly-distributed flavor and each bite brought a new surprise. The amount used was no different, but the oil flavor did not stick with him and he felt refreshed. The way she used the herbs and spices was a lot like how a summoner mixed their own Incense Grenades.
“Hm. This goes down surprisingly easily.”
“It’s not like we’re Tokyo stock brokers who spend all day at a desk. We’re summoners who use our brains and bodies quite a lot. If anything, it’s a mystery how you’ve lasted so long on nothing but cereal.”
“But…ew. Does this milk have honey in it!?”
“Not quite. The actual secret ingredient is condensed milk☆”
“I’d forgotten *you* had such a sweet tooth, Biondetta. Urp.”
Kyousuke set the glass down and pushed it away with a fingertip. His tongue simply could not accept that one. Perhaps because it had no pepper in it.
Biondetta removed her apron and toyed with the cat nametag on her obi before casually grabbing the rejected glass and setting a suspicious-looking brown bottle on the table. It was stuffed full of white antibiotic pills. A big sister who had run into him in the bath was powerful indeed. She did not even blush at the prospect of an indirect kiss and drained the glass with a smile.
“Once you’re used to condensed milk, it goes down quite easily too. Are you familiar with South Indian tea? They fill it with plenty of condensed milk and use air to make it dance around.”
“Stop bringing up other cultures and traditions to criticize me. And more importantly…”
With a quiet clunk, Kyousuke casually placed a silver key with a 30-carat diamond in it on the table. It was the Diamond Master Key. In a something-

or-other suspense theatre on TV, people would die left and right for 10 million yen, so something like this could easily lead to an entire museum blowing up, but unfortunately, these two were dealing with a war, not crime.
“Let’s decide what to do next.”
On Kyousuke’s suggestion, Biondetta stopped moving her fork and shrank her shoulders down.
“My apologies, sir. Please punish me for that.”
“I wasn’t trying to criticize you.”
“I have all the tools you might need. It won’t be any trouble for you. If you like, I can lecture you on the use of some more minor tools like the flute, the violin, the Judas cradle, or the pear of anguish.”
“Aren’t those all medieval torture devices with perverted aspects to them? Are you really apologetic or are you teasing me!?”
“Oh, how knowledgeable. Then I have nothing to worry about☆”
“Ahem. I said that night was your final test, but I knew we would share the same fate as soon as I let *you* out of your cage. And criticizing *you* would be meaningless. It won’t bring the Golden Treasure Chest back.”
Yes.
The Saint had escaped Biondetta. If the Summoning Ceremony battle came to an end, the loser would be left a zombie for more than 24 hours, but they had reached the 10 minute time limit and it had ended in a draw. They had had no idea how much backup that indulgent saint/witch had with her, so retreating had been the best option.
And so Kyousuke and Biondetta had the master key while Bridesmaid had the treasure chest.
“Biondetta, can they pry open the chest without the key?”
“If that was possible, wouldn’t you have focused on the chest from the beginning? If the legends surrounding it are true, forcing it open will cause it to self-destruct and the secrets inside will be lost. It’s like quantum cryptography. …Of course, there’s always a possibility those believers will do something stupid.”
“…”
All of the White Queen’s worshipers were insane, but insanity was not enough to execute such a largescale plan. This group was known for waiting with surprising clarity and taking action with surprising audacity. He doubted they would do anything rash during this preparatory phase.
“Let’s just assume you have to use both the key and the chest.”
“In that case, Bridesmaid is sure to attack us. A defensive battle goes against my stance as a hired avenger, so we need to take the initiative back somewhere.”
“*Your* stance doesn’t matter, but there is a wider range of options for us.” Kyousuke sighed. “The chest only contains the decoder for the location of the Founder’s Gallery. It isn’t the actual answer. That means there’s also an

ancient map that information is used with. And the legends say that treasure map is *drawn on human skin*."
"Three sacred treasures? Come to think of it, the president of Toy Dream created the Gozaru Samurai when he was inspired by Japanese culture, didn't he?"
"The fly in the ointment is how he was just a bit mistaken about a lot of it. … But seeing a Rekshy Warrior sword-fighting in space using a glowing katana is really exciting. To foreigners."
Anyway…
"We don't know where they are and they don't know where we are, so neither of us can make an attack right away even if we want to. So don't we have the perfect bait to lay a trap? We just have to use the owner of the ancient map."
And they needed that map either way.
If Bridesmaid was after both the master key and the ancient map, their actions would be harder to predict, but a counterattack would be much easier if both their targets were in one place.
Biondetta clapped her hands in front of her pink mini-yukata's chest.
"Now, a question: where is this ancient map?"
"That's well-known. It originally belonged to a family that protected an Egyptian pyramid. They grew close to the president of Toy Dream due to his passionate efforts to preserve the pictures and writing on the walls there. And when the Toy Dream Company bought up all the land around those ruins and then moved the pharaoh's body and the grave goods into a museum, that family moved with them. They claim wherever the pharaoh sleeps is the homeland they must protect."
"Meaning?'
"Toy Dream 35. They live in a normal apartment in this city. They're apparently working with a Japanese software development company to do some VR mapping. That will later become a new attraction where you put on goggles and explore a pyramid full of traps."

Part 2

It was a stereotypical Toy Dream 35 high-rise building sticking directly up from the ocean.
Inside a luxury apartment's living room, Kyousuke ignored the invitation to sit on the sofa and stood by the wall. Biondetta waited by his side like a well-behaved hound.

This was “their” current base.
They had only lived alongside the stone ruins because it was the most efficient way to protect the pharaoh’s body.
The tomb keeper family had protected the pyramid for millennia, but they were now sitting in an air-conditioned room, holding an online meeting, and throwing a tantrum: “No, you can’t just throw a texture on there. You have to register the peaks to properly map out the surface.” It might seem wrong, but that was the passage of time.
A brown-skinned woman was washing the dishes in the kitchen while a group of several men and woman were gathered around an OA desk computer in a corner of the living room while pointing at the screen and debating something. Kyousuke spoke under his breath while aware their eyes were on him.
“(Oh? So they can perceive us even when we aren’t in their field of vision?)
“(Sir, maybe they are intentionally keeping their Awards in the double digits so they can communicate between both sides of the world. Government often does that.)”
“(I wish, but this smells different. They seem more amateurish.)”
But that did not particularly matter.
There was another problem: They had used Aika as a Government middleman and arrived to offer their services as bodyguards, but they had been politely refused because the tomb keepers had already hired someone else.
“…”
“…”
Shiroyama Kyousuke faced a pair of shrine maiden twins who were crossing their arms and staring at him.
It was Meinokawa Renge and Meinokawa Higan.
Despite being twins, one of them had flowing black hair and the other had magnificent blonde hair.
His words were cruel.
“Those two are useless, so they won’t be any help at all.”
“Hey!!” shouted the strong-willed twin, but no one was listening.
A brown-skinned and muscular old man in a casual suit seemed to be the representative here, so Kyousuke’s tone grew serious when he spoke to that man.
“Have you ever heard the name Bridesmaid? They’re going to show up soon with plenty of summoners at the Award 900 level, so you could use all the help you can get.”
“Uuh…! H-he just gave them information that, um, not even we knew about…!”
The shy twin tearfully hid behind her sister’s back.
Mini-Yukata Biondetta clapped her hands in front of her chest and tilted her head.

“By the way, the two of us are both at Freedom’s Award 900 level. Look into the names Liar Cat and Alice (with) Rabbit and you should find everything you need to know.”
“Biondetta, I don’t think *your* legends are going to be much of a selling point.”
“Don’t be so sure. …They might realize that displeasing me here will lead me to bare these legendary fangs.”
Kyousuke wanted to hold his head in his hands. Biondetta did not seem to care whether they acted as the tomb keeper’s bodyguards or just stole the ancient map, as long as they got their hands on the map they needed as bait.
“Biondetta, over here a moment.”
“Yes, sir.”
Kyousuke and his faithful servant stepped out into the family apartment’s hallway for a private chat.
“Just to be clear, that method won’t necessarily work. If Bridesmaid doesn’t notice we stole the ancient map, they’ll still attack the tomb keepers. And no matter how much the tomb keepers insist they don’t have the map, they’ll probably be tortured to find out if they’re telling the truth. Plus, once it’s clear they aren’t any use, they’ll be silenced while weak from torture and unable to resist. In other words, just taking the map now wouldn’t protect them.”
“True enough. Such a flawless analysis, sir.” Horned Biondetta nodded and smiled like a tutor. “But what does that matter? Our goal is the Natural History’s missing entries and this tomb keeper family is only a detour. As long as you stay focused, some small detours are fine, but I see no real reason to stick with them if they stubbornly refuse to recognize the approaching danger.”
Her smile reminded Kyousuke of someone from somewhere else.
It was a white, lovely, and infinitely pure evil.
“…Curse the Queen’s hatred.”
“Yes. My role here is to suggest the things you cannot☆”
The demon smiled as she toyed with the cat nametag on her obi. Kyousuke figured this was still better than licking each other’s wounds and not even working to stop her, so he breathed a heavy sigh and made up his mind.
“We’re not abandoning anyone to die.”
“Yes, sir.”
“If we’re getting their help to reach our objective, then we need to share their fate. I want to protect them no matter what.”
“If that is your stance for enjoying the ultimate revenge, then so be it.”
That hired avenger was obedient as long as she could translate it into her own words. And as complicated as it was, he simply had to persuade anew her each and every time. He did not want to agree with Biondetta, but the tomb keeper family was indeed being too careless concerning the

approaching danger. Just as they started back into the previous room, an unexpected voice reached them.
It came from a different door.
“Hello, you two visitors. There is no need to speak with my retainers any longer. Come directly here. I grant you an audience.”
It was a quiet feminine voice. It was polite and enticing, but it lacked the provocative tone that Biondetta used. These were words that flowed down from above. The tone carried a pressure that forced anyone listening to accept her superior position. Kyousuke saw it as the voice of a ruler. It was the voice of someone who had been born into a position of power and *used that position like it was normal* instead of drowning in it.
But he could not let this deceive him.
That voice was a technique, not a natural talent. It was a technique for a single individual to bring together a large group. It was a method used by dictators to gather the people together. …It may have been mankind’s oldest discipline, dating back to when humans first started living together in groups. For example, people would stand on a platform for a position physically above everyone or they would use a megaphone or microphone so their voice would carry into the distance. Even a school principal would use these methods, but did the people listening or the person using them even realize these were methods of influencing people’s impressions?
And the Queen took all of that to another, completely unrecognizable level. If they had not known her, Kyousuke and Biondetta might have had their souls bound as much as anyone else. And comfortably so. Without even realizing they had been intentionally restrained.
Imprisonment became protection. Confiscation became an offering. Violence became education. Poverty became prosperity. Misfortune became happiness.
This ruler’s invitation could change one’s understanding of all those things.
And Kyousuke smoothly responded. What was one to do when the lost civilization of Ancient Egypt called out to them from beyond a door? …He gave no thought to such questions and followed the modern methods by walking to the thin door.
It was Biondetta by his side and not Kyousuke himself who lightly knocked at the door.
“I already gave you permission. Please come in.”
The polite words had a note of forcefulness to them, so they were a command.
Biondetta grabbed and silently turned the knob so her master would not have to and she pushed the door open.
Another world opened before their eyes.
That room with thick curtains blocking out all light seemed entirely cut off from the rest of the family apartment. It was like a temple or stone hut. The flickering flames on wicks soaked in oil lit the gold and jewels filling the space. But this was not just a worldly desire for liquid assets. That was

obvious enough from the accurate arrangement that ignored the cardinal directions and even the spacing of the room. This was the grave keepers' macro universe, their view of life and death, and the micro structure of their bodies. This was only natural given the accurate structure and knowledge of astronomy seen in the pyramid they had protected.
A girl sat at the center of that knowledge that spiraled outward with countless meanings.
She had brown skin and short silver hair.
She looked around 17 or 18, but her appearance could not be trusted. She looked a little too thin to call slender and the space between her breaths and heartbeats were clearly much longer than the average person's. Her cycle of ingestion and consumption, her body's metabolism, and the division of her microscopic cells were all artificially altered, so it was entirely possible there was a discrepancy between her apparent age and the amount of time that had passed in the world around her. The word "yoga" was used in gyms in modern times, but this went far beyond that. If she claimed she could live in this room for 5 years by drinking dew and controlling her breathing, Kyousuke would not have doubted her.
She may have been using just her own mind to produce a state of cold sleep while at room temperature. Or maybe it was more like a tree extending its roots into the earth.
If a Buddhist priest that claimed to have rid himself of worldly thoughts and become one with nature saw her perfection, he might just be dragged down into the abyss by his own envy and anger.
She was more like a divine object than a queen.
That explained why that ruler's voice had sounded almost divine. This brown girl had taken a step to the other side using a process other than a summoner aiming for Award 1000.
Her body was wrapped in many bandages and adorned in places with pure gold and red jewels. She also wore a vanishingly thin decorative cloth much like a lace veil or shawl. However, it was extremely long. It was draped over her neck and shoulders like a towel, wrapped once around her waist, and then allowed to hang down, so it formed a Y-shape overall.
She effectively had nothing to hide her bodylines.
But despite being half naked, her divinity overpowered the sexuality. Just like the Venus de Milo or Michelangelo's David, her body was so perfectly formed that there was no room for any common animal lust. In fact, it seemed to purify that desire away.
The girl's lips opened slightly.
Just watching that may have cleansed one's heart.
"Please forgive my rudeness, but I must omit the formalities in this pressing situation. My name is Sekurtiti. I am this generation's Tomb Priestess who guards the pharaoh's body during his brief absence and returns his soul to that dried and preserved vessel of flesh."
"Pff."

But the mood was ruined by a laugh.
Kyousuke glared at Biondetta next to him, but she could not stop the shaking of her shoulders. She had directly faced the White Queen just like him, so she could not be trapped by the bonds of these normal “techniques”.
Sekurtiti froze in place on the floor and doubt entered her light blue eyes.
“Is something the matter?”
“No, excuse me. I just thought it was surprisingly worldly for a human to pretend to be some higher being. Especially when you showed off your background and authority to take the initiative.”
“…”
“Now, now. Don’t get all tense. We can tell at a glance that you really have started to reach a higher stage. We’re at the 900 level ourselves. Just like you, we have one foot on the stairway up. Yes, just like you.”
She spoke slowly and gently, but also sharp and piercingly. It was like hearing a classmate proudly showing off some piece of trivia they knew and then commenting that you had also seen that on TV the day before.
Kyousuke brought his index finger to his temple and spoke.
“Biondetta.”
The yukata demon stuck out her tongue. She may have been trying to make her contracted master look impressive, but it was extremely childish. She looked like a big sister butting in when her little brother started to lose an argument.
“Very well, I shall forgive you of your rudeness, visitors. Malicious though it might be, it comes from an adorable place deep down. You cannot help but love on your little brother, can you? *Not your client, but your little brother.*”
“…The hell’d you say?”
“Stop! That’s enough of pitting your divine powers against each other in some unknown dimension!! And the tomb keepers out front would weep if they knew you were using that for something so trivial!!”
Both girls cleared their throat at the same time.
She gets oddly fixated on retaliating against people and might really hate losing, mentally noted Kyousuke concerning the brown priestess.
“I heard your discussion from in here.”
“Eavesdropping? What a vulgar hobby. Hee hee. Did you order some night vision goggles to use in the park at night on the weekends?”
“I’m going to leave your face a bruised mess and take you on a walk like a dog, you extreme sweet tooth. I mean…excuse me.”
Sekurtiti once more displayed some information she should not have known. Or perhaps she had gathered some data on her guests once they had arrived like stage magicians would do.
“From what I have heard, you need the ancient map that we manage. Yes, and when I say ‘you’, I am not just referring to the two of you.”
“Can your divine power tell us the scale of the enemy we’re up against?”
“I sense a very deep darkness. So deep it is difficult to see through to the bottom.”

“That could apply to just about anything,” whispered Biondetta.
Kyousuke tried stomping on her foot, but she nimbly dodged, leaving him with no choice but to pinch her soft cheek.
“Thah hurhsh, shir!”
“Bad Biondetta.”
Still seated, Sekurtiti looked up at them with the golden decorations in her hair and she gave a warning.
“You two, quit flirting in front of the Tomb Priestess.”
“We’re not flirting! That divine power of yours is completely useless!”
“We’re not flirting! That divine power of yours is completely useless!”
“Anyway.”
With a calm look on her face, the brown priestess continued while gently shaking the decorative lace cloth draped over her shoulders in a Y-shape.
“I understand that we will be attacked by a dangerous lot whether we have the ancient map or not. We cannot ignore any tomb raiders who would bring unneeded chaos to the pharaoh’s place of slumber or who would lay a hand on his treasures. So as you said, we could use all the help we can get.”
No, that was not it. She was not shaking the cloth. After remaining seated like she had been carrying out a ritual all this time, the Tomb Priestess stood up as smoothly as a clay doll that showed no limitations in its joints or center of gravity.

“Oh, how cooperative of you. And I thought you would be more hardheaded.”
“I am merely saying we must protect wherever it is the pharaoh sleeps. President Toydream built up a relationship of trust in his efforts to preserve our culture and traditions and we are also indebted to him after *the Seth incident*.”
She did not stop there.
The cloth as thin as fairy wings fell away. She exposed a body too thin to call slender with only bandages roughly wrapped around her brown nudity.
No, Sekurtiti still was not done. She removed the gold decorations and turned her back to Kyousuke and Biondetta. Then she reached both hands for the bandages on the sides of her hips.
Almost like she was untying a swimsuit’s strings.
It happened as easily as a present being unwrapped. The final cloths protecting the girl’s body fell to the floor.
Something was faintly visible on her bared back.
“Nn… My apologies. The Lifelong Emblem only appears clearly on my skin when my blood flow increases.”
“Keh heh heh. So that’s why you wanted a guy watching. Exposing yourself to starved eyes turns you on.”
“Biondetta.”
“…U-um, sir. Isn’t it rude to not react at all? I’m actually feeling a little sorry for her.”
“Not to worry. I will forgive your rudeness, visitor. Those crude and vulgar words are necessary here. Your response is most logical. Nnn!!”
Like a piece of trick art, their view of the world changed at some point.
As the girl blushed and squeezed her eyes shut, something appeared on her naked back. It initially looked like a magic circle. It was known as an ancient map, but this was not enough to know what area it referenced. It was not necessarily anywhere near the Nile where so many pyramids remained.
“I see. So you can’t find the Founder’s Gallery without all three sacred treasures.”
Kyousuke smiled a little.
They already had two of them: the Diamond Master Key and the Girl’s Ancient Map.
That left just one.
Once they had the Golden Treasure Chest, they could reach the Founder’s Gallery and the scraps of parchment known as the Natural History’s missing entries. What was now only a vague image in his mind would take physical form in his hand.
This time, his broken heart could reboot.
“I would like for you to protect this with your Award 900 power.”
With that done, Sekurtiti kept her back to them, crouched down, and picked up the long bandages that had fallen to the floor.

“We are talking about a treasure that enthralled even the ruler of Toy Dream. It must be worth enough for any number of people to target it. I pray that you too will not succumb to its demonic power, Shiroyama Kyousuke.”
“Neh heh heh. I seem to recall Toy Dream’s 3D cartoons including a few magic circles appearing on people’s backs. …I hope it wasn’t just that the president was a pervert with a thing for the curves of young brown girls☆ Hopefully this isn’t like that author who is suspected to have made a world famous children’s book just to win the hearts of some little girls he knew.”
“Biondetta.”
Kyousuke finally spoke the forbidden words.
“Sit. Stay. That’s enough.”

Part 3

Meanwhile, the Meinokawa Sisters were trembling in fear after being left behind in the (supposedly) main living room.
“(R-Renge, um, what do we do!? Now that Shiroyama-san is here, there’s no way we can win! They’ll fire us and we won’t get paid!!)”
“(Shut up, Higan. Leave this to my negotiations skills. Uuh…but why is it more Freedom summoners? And with two 900 level ones butting in, I’m starting to wonder if they told us the wrong rate for this one…)”
For one thing, this was Toy Dream 35. With a swimsuit and white liger Government pair who had somehow reached the upper 800s without ever leaving her apartment and a mysterious China dress from Illegal who defeated summoners with her own body and hidden weapons instead of a Material, the city had some harsh competition.
And the eyes of the tomb keepers working in the living room were not giving them a clear answer. They did not actively support the twins and simply hoped the twins could be of some use. It was the usual stance toward outsiders brought in as mercenaries.
“(U-um, are we carrying some bad karma or something?)”
“(I don’t think this is on that level. If anything, I think we’re lacking something…)”
To be clear, the Meinokawa Sisters were not low-level summoners, but this was not a place where one could distinguish herself with average skill. This was Toy Dream 35 where the once-in-2000-years typhoon known as the White Queen and the eye of the storm known as Shiroyama Kyousuke were frequently seen.

Yes.
For example…
“Woof woof!! Woof woof woof woof!! How long are you just going to tease me, sir! I can’t stand it any longer!! I just want to dig in right away!! Your orders have built up so much pressure inside me and it’s allll about to burst out!! Kyahhhn! Hah hah hah hah!!!!!”
“Why are you doubling down and trying to enjoy this!? Stop! People are going to think I’m a pervert too! Really, Sekurtiti, this isn’t what I wanted! Look carefully with your divine power. Eh? What? You see something even worse in me? What the hell do you think you saw, you occult pervert girl!?”
……
……
The twin shrine maidens and the brown-skinned tomb keepers felt their minds go blank and silence surrounded them for a while.
And once she got tired of surrendering herself to that, blonde Higan finally opened her eyes.
“That’s what we lack!!”
“We can’t, Higan! We can’t let ourselves turn into freaks like that!!”
Renge desperately clung to her sister’s waist to keep her from heading toward the sounds of a commotion still coming from the other room.
But those sounds finally came to a stop.
And Freedom Award 903 stepped out with a look of blazing duty in his eyes.
“Sorry about the wait, everyone. Tomb Priestess Sekurtiti and I have reached an agreement.”
“(Wh-what happened in there, um, Renge?)”
“(Shh! Ask that and I have a feeling your life is forfeit, Higan.)”
His hair and clothing were in disarray like he had been playing with a large and undisciplined dog that liked to jump up on people and his entire face was sticky with what looked like dog drool.
Horned Biondetta stood next to him feigning ignorance, but Sekurtiti (who should have stood in the center as the ruler of this place) was cowering over by the wall and trembling. It entirely ruined the majesty of the gold decorations and Y-shaped lace cloth as thin as fairy wings that barely covered her bandaged but otherwise nude body. Those two summoners must have held a sublime battle and that girl’s pale blue eyes had peered into a forbidden abyss.
The old man in a casual suit looked highly affronted that they had gone over his head for that audience, but he did not actually say anything as he supported the Tomb Priestess’s body. That may have been a sign of how well trained he was.
“L-l-listen carefully, everyone. Ahem. These two are no longer visitors. We shall open all chambers to them as brethren who will take up arms and fight alongside us against any who would disturb the ancient pharaoh’s slumber. Understood?”

But once her tongue got moving, she was a ruler once more. Just like the bullet would fly when the trigger was pulled, her established technique would not betray her. The tomb keepers were used to obeying her, but even outsiders like Renge and Higan (who were even disadvantaged by Kyousuke and Biondetta's intrusion) felt their shoulder's jump as their hearts switched over to respectful listening mode. No, from their view, they were being lured in by those glistening lips.
This was different from normal hypnotism. With the method widely known to the world at large and that was legally accepted as a medical treatment in Canada, the subject would generally reject any request that would harm them. That was the origin of the well-known ideas that skeptics could not take part in a séance and that a hypnotized person could not be ordered to die. …But to put it another way, a true ruler could do so. With a single statement, she could turn white into black or have the target take their own life.
Gold-adorned Sekurtiti had subconsciously learned these techniques from the situations she found herself in.
But that was not the true essence of her being.
The overly smooth movement, the words that drew people's minds to her lips, and the beauty that drove away animal lust were all part of what attracted people to her, but that was not what she was. If what she said was true, then she too was a servant. She guided the boat that carried the ancient pharaoh's soul between this world and the underworld. She was only ruling over people to optimize her ability to fulfill that role.
She would return the ancient king's soul to his preserved flesh body.
That was a form of summoning.
"So, Shiroyama Kyousuke. When will the calamity you speak of arrive? And what can we do before then?"
"Well, I apologize in advance for how pessimistic this is going to sound."
Kyousuke placed his index finger on his chin and looked up at the ceiling.
And he made an announcement.
"But I'm honestly surprised it hasn't arrived yet."
Immediately, an explosive noise shook the entire apartment.

Part 4

"Wh-what-…bgyuh!?"
Renge carelessly tried to look out the window, so Kyousuke grabbed the back of her shrine maiden outfit's collar and pulled her back. Appearing at

the window right now would be suicide. Who could say how many sniper bullets would have hit her?
And he could tell what had happened without looking out the window. Toy Dream 35 was a three-dimensional city built over the ocean using countless buildings with giant bridges between them. So if the bridges connecting to the exits were blown up, the way out as well as the electricity, communications, water, gas, and other infrastructure could be cut off.
The enemy was undoubtedly trying to isolate them.
And once that was done, they would attack.
“Even if I’m being optimistic, we can’t have more than 30 seconds. How many forces do you have in the building?”
Sekurtiti glanced over, so the old man in a casual suit answered.
“The entire apartment building is fortified with tomb keepers, so fear not. Our prized warrior priests will use their defenses of stone and faith of steel to become a wall before the Tomb Priestess. And even a single one possesses the strength to overcome a war elepha-…”
“Don’t let any of them fight. A summoner can’t start a battle without seeing you with the naked eye. Instead of forcing your way out, your odds of survival are much higher if you curl up in a corner of the room buried in cushions. A tiny closet or bathroom would be much worse. It’s easiest to be overlooked in the corner of a large room. …But the real trick is to remain patient. That isn’t something just anyone can do. Listen, you can’t move a millimeter once they begin the search. Pass this on to everyone.”
“You-…”
He may have wanted to shout “you brat”, but they had no time.
As soon as Kyousuke kicked the muscular old man out of the way and Biondetta grabbed her master’s waist and pushed him to the floor, an incredible storm of destruction assaulted the room.
It was like horizontal lines punched through all of the living room’s windows at even intervals. A spray of autocannon fire smashed everything at waist height, starting at one end of the room and moving to the other.
“!”
Still on the floor, Kyousuke reached for his back and pulled out Phosphorus, the Repliglass Blood-Sign coiled up and stored there. Using just his arm strength, he swung it around and tripped Renge and Higan to the floor since they were just standing there. He then set his sights on Sekurtiti, but something odd happened.
For some reason, the brown Tomb Priestess rejected Kyousuke’s helping hand. As the Blood-Sign skimmed across the floor, she stepped on it and pinned it down.
“Hmph.”
And once the horizontal sweep of gunfire was over, only she reigned in that room.
She alone was unharmed because she had been standing right in the gap between two bullets.

“No matter how heavily armed they are, no tomb keeper will be done in by uncivilized tomb raiders. What matters is punishing these outlaws who disturb the pharaoh’s slumber by making a mess of this city built by President Toydream.”
(That’s really something…)
Kyousuke was honestly impressed. If he was being honest, a lot of luck had come into play when it came to saving the old man in the casual suit, Renge, and Higan. They could proudly proclaim that luck had smiled on them this day. But Sekurtiti had taken it a step further. She could go as far as to say she was loved by a god.
But they could not afford to forget that this was a Summoning Ceremony battlefield.
When up against summoners who could freely wield beings that surpassed the gods of legend, being loved by a god was not enough to ensure her safety.
Kyousuke detected an unpleasant odor like a car’s cigarette lighter being pressed against wallpaper.
The bullets embedded in the walls were exhibiting a strange reaction.
There were special bullets designed to pierce armor and then ignite inside to fry the engine or electronics. Those were armor-piercing incendiary rounds, but that was not what these were. If these were meant to effectively increase the power of summoners and vessels…
“Are they Incense Grenades!? Biondetta!!”
“Yes, sir.”
With a sound much like a thunderbolt, the Tomb Priestess with the ancient map on her back and everyone else there were contained inside the 20 meter cube of an Artificial Sacred Ground. What was done was done.
Kyousuke and Biondetta got up with Blood-Signs at the ready. They both ignored the peanut gallery lying on the floor in a daze and the divinely-inspired girl still standing tall.
An Artificial Sacred Ground would only open when the Incense Grenade was thrown and detonated while the target human was seen with the naked eye. And if the summoner and vessel were not there already, they would be automatically taken to the detonation point. Gravity did not matter.
The bridges had been cut off.
The summoners and vessels had likely flown horizontally over from the neighboring building with the force of a missile. It was a lot like special forces breaking through a window after climbing down a wall with a rope. But they were not much of a challenge when their numbers and locations were known in advance.
There would be a pair of them for each Incense Grenade embedded in the wall like an armor-piercing incendiary round and they would be moving toward precisely the locations of those bullet holes.
Kyousuke and Biondetta stood back-to-back, swung their Blood-Signs horizontally like baseball bats, and knocked them all out with lariat-like

blows to the neck. The summoners had come flying in at abnormal speed, so it was a hellish situation for them. Before they could even land on their feet, they spun around on their necks and collapsed onto the floor.
Once the summoners had all been knocked out without even summoning a single Material, Kyousuke and Biondetta were given control of their Artificial Sacred Ground as the “victors”, but they did not bother holding onto it. They canceled the Chain state without waiting the full 90 seconds, so the Artificial Sacred Ground and the glowing red cube of Roses vanished.
Of course, Bridesmaid would not only be entering through that one route. Either to clear the way for more summoners to enter through the windows or to hold Kyousuke and Biondetta in place before another team could arrive, the autocannon was sure to fire again.
“Shall we tie these guys up and decorate the windows with them?”
“I don’t think worshipers of *that* Queen are going to be bothered by human shields.”
“Then how about I enjoy some clay target shooting? Don’t worry, though. This is a 7.62mm bolt-action. I won’t miss from this range, sir.”
“Understood. But only neutralize them. Don’t kill. I’ll draw their attention to the window in here, so you move to another room and-…”
It happened just as they were discussing that.
“…”
It came with no warning or advance notice at all. The brown Tomb Priestess named Sekurtiti approached the window through which the autocannon had fired.
It happened just before Kyousuke and Biondetta used their Blood-Signs to knock her to the floor by catching at her legs and neck respectively.
“I must punish any who disturb the pharaoh’s slumber and threaten our new holy land.”
It happened just after she whispered that.
“Haahhhhhh!!!!!!”
She gave a shout and thrust her open palms straight forward.
That was all.
She seemed to be pantomiming the glass that had filled that window before it shattered. It did not look like the motion of someone familiar with martial arts.
Nevertheless, Kyousuke and Biondetta’s weapons stopped at the last moment. No, their Blood-Signs were trembling slightly. Kyousuke could not move his weapon forward or pull it back and Oiran Mini-Yukata Biondetta could not move with her weapon partially thrust forward from the hip.
(Wha-…?)
A distant sound of destruction followed. It came from the autocannon. However, it was not the sound of it firing properly. It had clearly malfunctioned in some way.
That girl was a ruler wearing a golden tiara, but that did not mean she could bend a spoon with psychokinesis.

(Did she lead the gunner astray and cause them to operate the weapon incorrectly?)
An autocannon was too heavy for one person to carry around and it was generally fired by a group of 2 to 4, with at least someone to aim and pull the trigger and someone to feed in the ammunition belt. Throwing off their synchronization would probably increase the odds of a mistake, but…
The tremor filling Kyousuke and Biondetta was no more than a glancing blow.
Was this the strength of a wall of the taboo set by a ruler? Simply by refusing an audience and hitting them with her established techniques, could she really bring people to a stop like this?
What had this wall looked like to the people on the other side? It was possible they literally had “seen” it silently approaching to crush them.
During the first sweep, it may not have been that the bullets had physically bent around her; it was possible the enemy gunner’s soul had been enough influenced by this ruler to hesitate
But a ruler was a ruler.
She did not brag and instead seemed to use this power *like it was normal*.
“I cannot keep this up forever. Humans can adapt to any stimulus. Just as all great heroes are dragged down by the masses in due time and just as a thousand-year empire is cruelly devoured, even glory and reverence are no more than emotions to be consumed.”
The Tomb Priestess’s pale blue eyes desired another method.
Since the ancient map was on the brown girl’s back, Kyousuke and Biondetta had no real reason to stay in the apartment. And the tomb keepers were willing to follow their pharaoh from the desert and refer to his location as their homeland. As long as it would not directly defile the pharaoh or the grave goods sleeping in the museum, they would not hesitate to move elsewhere.
The only question was when to do it.
With all the bridges destroyed, it would be difficult to escape the isolated building. And Bridesmaid would of course have the area surrounded. They could not move on until they broke through. But that also meant they were home free as long as they did break through. That old man had said the entire building was fortified with tomb keepers. That meant Kyousuke did not have to worry about unrelated civilians getting caught in the middle. He had to create an opening through which they could escape, even if it meant sacrificing the entire apartment building.
“Let’s move almost everyone in the building down to the bottom. The building’s ground level is at the bottom of the ocean. Once Bridesmaid sees everyone moving there, they’re sure to think we have a submarine hidden there.”
“But no such submarine exists!” snapped back the elderly aide.
“That’s fine.” Kyousuke did not care. “We just have to make them think there’s one. Once they start fearing an underwater route, their circle will

naturally tighten in. The autocannon's power would be weakened by the thick wall of seawater and you can't see as far through the water as you might think. And then…"
Kyousuke snapped his fingers and pointed up at the ceiling.
Biondetta looked like she understood.
"Oh, I get it. We blow up the top level of the building. The downpour of rubble will crush the Bridesmaid group that carelessly approached with submersible weaponry."
"Yes, yes! So it's the same as the classic trap where you roll a giant boulder down the corridor to crush all of the tomb raiders at once. I do not like destroying a portion of Toy Dream 35 which acts as the pharaoh's tomb, but if it is for a trap to clear away the uncivilized tomb raiders, then we have no other choice!!"
"Why are you suddenly leaning forward with sparkling eyes, Sekurtiti!?"
"I should have expected this from the great technological nation of Japan. From the ancient ninja houses to the modern roach sheets and flypaper, countless traps have permeated your souls, so of course the protectors here would think differently. Oh, but I hate to throw out the functional beauty of a carnivorous plant such as the pitcher plant or the Venus flytrap. As the protectors of the pharaoh's tomb, there is so much to learn from Asia. Ahh…"
"Y-you're getting pretty close!! Where did this pressure come from!?"
The plan was simple enough, but it was impossible with normal explosives or a gas explosion. As any video of a building demolition would show, buildings generally collapsed downwards or fell over; they never scattered rubble from above like a volcanic eruption. And causing it to "collapse downwards" would crush the people on the ground level as bait, so they had to prevent the blast from propagating through the intervening floors.
If no realistic methods could pull it off, what could they rely on?
There was of course only one answer: They were experts at using the Summoning Ceremony.
"Hmm. But, sir, that would mean…"
"Yes, I'd like to split the summoners up, with a pair up top and one down below. Biondetta, *you* go down. Make sure you can protect the tomb keepers with the Summoning Ceremony if anything goes wrong. Can I count on you?"
"Yes, sir."
And while Kyousuke was a skilled summoner, he had no vessel partner at the moment.
Black-haired Renge let out a snort and demonstrated her willingness to do this.
"Fine then! We just have to head up to the top and start a Material rampage when the timing is right, don't we!?"
"I'm pretty sure I know the answer, but have you ever helped destroy a largescale building? Once these high-rise buildings start to collapse, it's

hard to stop the chain reaction and difficult to control the destruction. Plus, not even the most skilled vessel can perfectly control the Material. This is going to be a lot like having your hand trembling wildly from the electrodes attached to it and still trying to pull out the pieces of a block puzzle tower one at a time. Can you really do that? If you fail, then about 200 lives will be lost."
"Awawawawawawa…"
"Good, I like your honesty. But I do have something for the two of you to do."
That meant she could not cancel her contract with Higan and give her to Kyousuke.
If he was to act as a summoner, he would need a new vessel. There was no need to look around since there was only one person there with the perfect traits for that.
"…"
Kyousuke and Sekurtiti silently faced each other.
She likely understood her own talent. She understood it and yet chose a different path. That showed a strength of its own. It may have been a greater strength than even Kyousuke who could only submerge himself in the Summoning Ceremony.
"You mustn't!!" The old man in a casual suit bowed deeply as he offered his own advice. "You have thoroughly followed your own rules and polished your soul without relying on anything else. If you open your body to the many gods, no one can predict how it will affect that polishing. In the worst case, you could even lose it all!!"
He was not just referring to her technique to rule over people.
He meant her true job that no one had ever seen and might not even exist. She was to accurately call the ancient pharaoh's soul back into his dried body. It was a different system of summoning.
If she did have that ability, it could conflict with the Blood-Sign method.
That old man who had lived by her side for so long knew just how valuable that was and the girl herself had to know that even better than him.
People could not escape the grasp of a power once they had relied on it.
That was as true of a bullet as it was a god.
If she had someone who would prevent her from letting go, she might be able to entrust herself to this.
But the ruler spoke.
"Stand back."
"!?"
"Shiroyama Kyousuke. This is an emergency. Couldn't you simply order me to do it?"
"Sorry, but forcing people to become my vessel just isn't my style."
"But what would you do if I refused?"
"Then this entire plan is shot and I'd have to think up something else."
Even this was a turning point.

Whether she agreed or not, Shiroyama Kyousuke had said he would escape this situation. That meant she could no longer let the situation force her into the contract. If the brown girl did not take that final step of her own volition, she could not arrive there.
In fact, this left her with no real reason to stray from her original path.
Who in this world had enough a reason, enough courage, or strong enough a soul to step into an unknown world when no one was pressuring her into it and when it would mean abandoning everything she had spent many long years building up?
And the ruler smiled.
It was a thin smile and she had the look of someone who was overcoming some kind of trial.
“But I am not a presence in any of those other solutions.”
“…”
“I am no more than a temporary ruler during the pharaoh’s absence, but I still have pride in the many lives I have supported to this day. What would I gain by turning my back on my duty and trying to flatter the tomb raiders with a smile on my face? How could my soul shine then? I, at least, cannot answer that question.”
That was the ruler’s choice.
Because she had ruled over everything *like it was normal*, she could also let go of that power *like it was normal*. She had that strength inside her. Only someone who knew what was truly important could make that choice.
Sekurtiti did not hesitate.
Just as she took pride in her superior position *like it was normal*, she could let go of it *like it was normal*. That was the kind of person she was.
“So please. I need your help to save my family.”

Part 5

All he needed was a small blade and his own fingertip.
By making a small cut on his index finger and allowing a single drop of blood to appear, he could easily open that “door”.
“I bind this covenant of blood in the name of The Spirit of Fluttering ‘Yellow’ Gills that Rules the Heavens (s – a – so – voz – tix – ei – yw – za), one of the Three which manage and guide the summoning ceremony. You are of human flesh with a proper heart and soul, yet from this moment onward, you shall be a limited vessel that can hold all things.”

The brown girl wrapped in bandages and a Y-shaped lace cloth kneeled on the spot.
This was a new contract.
By stripping off her old self, she would reveal a new self to the world. Her position and status a moment earlier meant nothing. Even if she had been a ruler who looked down upon a great multitude.
“You shall be a lord of emptiness that uses the power filling you to at times bend the laws of this world.”
It was like a noble fairy queen sipping dew from the tip of a leaf. It was like a filthy dog devouring leftover food splattered in a back alley.
In a way that caused everyone’s values to crumble away, she reached her tongue for his finger. She reached for the single drop there which was both the most venomous and most divine thing in the world.
“So I shall prepare this vessel. I am a summoner, unable to leave the world of man, yet a symbol of haughty intellect that uses power from beyond the world of man to guide the world of man to the next age!!”
And she made contact.
She licked it up, rolled it around in her mouth, and swallowed it. Something exploded inside that girl adorned with bandages and with gold. What had been there before and what had not been there before clashed and the ends of every last nerve in her body opened like connection ports.
The brown girl arched her back like she had been struck by lightning. With violent convulsions, her mouth opened as wide as possible and pointed toward the ceiling. The roar of a fearsome beast burst forth, but it now lacked the dignity and style of a ruler.
She had been rewritten.
She had been updated.
She was now the mystical itself as a vessel that could freely contain even those that lurked beyond the gods.

Part 6

Everything was ready.
Kyousuke checked on his Blood-Sign, counted how many Incense Grenades he had on hand, and waited for his new vessel to stand by his side. He looked around the room and stuck the tip of his Blood-Sign toward the remains of a destroyed table scattered across the floor. He caught something on it and tossed it to Sekurtiti.

It looked like the rectangular case for mint tablets, but it was not. It was a pedometer with a digital counter.
“?”
“Attach this at your waist. It can work as a restraint. Beauty and health can easily provide mental bonds, especially for women. If you don’t want to have your body hijacked by unwanted evil and vengeful spirits, I recommend physically creating a mental switch.”
“I see.”
She nodded and obediently attached the pedometer’s clip to a knot she had tied when putting the bandages back on after showing them the ancient map earlier. The bandages may have come undone easily, so she wanted something to reinforce the knot.
Meanwhile, Blonde Shrine Maiden Higan was blushing a bright red and covering her face with her hands.
“O-oh, no… Was I, um, like that too when I did it…?”
“Hmm. It’s different for everyone, but…yeah, I think you’re on the lewder end of the spectrum, Higan.”
“…!!!???”
“Ha ha ha. I hate to interrupt you when you’re blushing, squeezing your eyes shut, and lightly hitting me, but this really isn’t the time. …Okay, you have your vessel and can move freely. So what are we supposed to do? You said you had something for us to do, right? Who do we have to fight!?”
Bridesmaid was not just going to wait around. And if they let the enemy keep the initiative, they would have less of a chance to enact their plan.
Kyousuke was honestly glad that Renge and Higan had made the offer themselves.
And so he did not hesitate to ask for their assistance.
“Right. Renge and Higan, you two come here. You’ll be my sparring partner.”
“What?”
“…Sparring? Eh?”
The twin shrine maidens looked baffled, so Kyousuke pointed overhead.
“I said I would be using a Material to send rubble down into the ocean, right?”
“U-um, uh, Shiroyama-san, you mean, um…”
“Didn’t something seem odd about this plan? I can’t summon a Material without an opponent. But I can’t exactly use a being greater than the gods on a normal tomb keeper or an unconscious enemy soldier. They could literally be smashed to pieces. I needed a summoner who can actually summon a Material.”
“You don’t mean…”
Renge had a very bad feeling about this, but as Kyousuke continued speaking, he grabbed Higan’s arm. Sekurtiti realized what he meant and grabbed Renge’s arm.
For some reason, the Tomb Priestess’s eyes were sparkling like a child’s.

“This is the true romance of pyramids. To finish off the loathsome tomb raiders with a false ceiling or boulder trap, you must first lure them in with the glitter of gold and silver. You must use treasure as bait.”
“Wha-? Eh? Wait…not so close!”
Renge lost to the pressure of the smile in front of her and sought help from elsewhere. And Kyousuke did not discriminate. As long as the conditions were right, he would get anyone involved regardless of age or sex.
And so that bastard spoke with a smile.
“Don’t worry. Even if you’re defeated, it only means 24 hours in a mindless trance. It’s not like you’ll die.”
“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!?”

Facts

- The ancient map was on Sekurtiti’s back. When her body temperature rises and her blood flow increases, it appears as a Lifelong Emblem, but the map itself is not enough to know where it points. Presumably, the completed map can only be read when the map is combined with whatever is found in the Golden Treasure Chest once it is opened with the Diamond Master Key.
- The tomb keeper family is not made up of summoners, but they have inherited ancient techniques which prospered before the creation of the Third Summoning Ceremony. This allows them to perceive and remember summoners and vessels even without earning any Awards.
- Sekurtiti has the power of a ruler who inspires reverence in people. But this is only a technique to distance her from minor issues and her true essence is that of one who reaches into another world to call back a soul. Whether or not this is effective is unknown.
- To protect the tomb keepers under her command and to fight Bridesmaid who she has deemed tomb raiders, Sekurtiti bound a contract as Kyousuke’s vessel despite the risk of losing her power as a ruler.
- When Biondetta loses her cool, she is apparently willing to go full dog mode. She must be handled with utmost care.

Stage 02: Insane Believers Never Ask for Anything in Exchange

“Wahh!! Crash, bang, boom!!!!!!”
“Hee! Are you trying to kill me, you idiot!?”
(Stage 02 Open 07/05 10:30)
Insane Believers Never Ask for Anything in Exchange

Part 1

Azalea Magentarain
At only 14, she was the former Government Award 930, Golden Luxury, and also one of the Uniquely Selfless summoners of the White Queen worshiping cult named Guard of Honor. She was a noble girl who inherited the blood of the Magentarain family and also the primary supporter of weapon design and development at Quad Motors, America’s largest defense contractor which was run by the same family. They developed Repliglass, silicon stem cells that were given the structure of various plants and animals. That Repliglass had swept across all 4 branches of the military and even been adopted into largescale civilian infrastructure like city water purification and power generation.
The Magentarain family itself was not completely American and was actually part of the Round Table, a group of those who had once sat on the throne and thus could not accept that the major position of the world police had been taken by a country in the New World created a mere 300 years before. The Magentarain family had been sent to control that country from within, but all of that can be omitted now.
That girl with long curly blonde hair no longer belonged to the Magentarain family.
The small, slender girl had found another symbol to gather around.
“Oh, dear. This is looking as wretched as always.”

Azalea spoke calmly while sitting inside the squat belly of a mid-sized transport Repliglass known as a Hornet.
“So we’re back in Toy Dream 35. Are we going to repeat everything from that time, Shiroyama Kyousuke?”
They had successfully isolated their enemy, but the simultaneous attacks from the various summoner and vessel pairs had ended in failure. Azalea and the others did not know what form the ancient map took, so they could not destroy the building from outside. That was one major factor, but there was more to it.
An elderly butler stood perfectly still in the rocking Repliglass craft and interjected some smooth words. His name was Fractal Leskins and every breath he took demonstrated that he stood at the peak of those who served.
“It would appear everything is going as planned, milady.”
“Yes.”
Azalea honestly thought that she needed to learn from him.
After all, she had chosen to become a servant herself.
“Whether consciously or subconsciously, the same vision must be playing in Shiroyama Kyousuke’s head. And there is no need to worry. Even if he fails to notice it, he will reflect on his former victory, assume he is in the same situation here, and relax. But unbeknownst to him, I will be guiding him all the while.”
Azalea could not write off her defeat as meaningless.
Because she had developed Repliglass weapons modeled after various plants and animals, she had come into contact with the information of several archives. For example, lions were known as the king of beasts, but it was the females that led the hunting, not the males with their impressive manes. And that representative example of carnivores could be driven off if the fleeing herbivorous zebras or giraffes kicked back at them or if a hippopotamus bit them.
Nevertheless, mocking a lion would be far too foolish. To do so would show a severe lack of observation. A feline would not repeat an action it considered dangerous. Even a pet cat would no longer approach the stove after it burned itself or the bathtub after it fell in and nearly drowned. And a lion had repeated that learning process day in and day out in an environment of life or death.
The king of beasts was not a creature that settled in at a fixed peak.
They were always updating themselves. And after a pack had sharply honed itself through that efficient decision-making, they would learn to surround the zebras or giraffes and attack from the sides so they could not be kicked by the back legs. Azalea was the same.
After being disciplined by the White Queen, she had cast off her impure soul and her defeat to Shiroyama Kyousuke had rid her of her pride as a summoner.
Just as Kyousuke had learned who Azalea was in their battle, she had learned from him.

She could easily come up with a phrase he was certain to detest.
“So I am something like the child who has inherited the genes of both Her Majesty and Shiroyama Kyousuke.”
The curly blonde-haired girl giggled and traced her fingers across the ribbon reels placed next to her.
“But there is no rule preventing a child from surpassing her parent. In fact, the theory of evolution says that each generation must leave behind even stronger seed. Now, Shiroyama Kyousuke. It’s about time to truly begin. You have scattered your genes throughout the world and it is time you learned what that has wrought.”
Azalea wondered what her past self – back when she was taken away by strange adults while only wrapped in an old cloth – would have thought if she could have seen herself now.
That past self never would have imagined being able to look down on and order around others.
That had been hell.
But someone had rescued her from there.
And that was why she had to live a life that would reward that person and make them proud.
No matter how twisted a path she took to get there.
She used her skinny fingers to flick at a few of the reels and then grabbed one of the pink ribbons. She went for #6. If she was following that incident in Toy Dream 35, she needed to go with the #6 reel that she had lost with then.
The blonde girl slowly stood up in the cargo room and spoke to her butler.
“I’ll be heading out too. Prepare the Meganeura.”

Part 2

Kyousuke, Sekurtiti, Renge, and Higan ran up the isolated apartment’s emergency staircase. Bridesmaid would soon notice that Biondetta and the tomb keepers had gone to the ground floor. Before they figured out what Kyousuke’s group was up to, he had to summon a Material, scatter rubble in every direction, and take out the Bridesmaid members approaching to surround the group underwater. They had to go that far to clear a way out.
Or so Kyousuke thought.
But then something unexpected happened.
“!?”

He had taken the lead, but he stopped and quickly held a hand out sideways while a step away from their target floor. Before Renge could say something about being stopped by an arm moving like a railway crossing gate, the floor above them was filled with a downpour of rubble and explosive noise.
“Kyaaaah!!”
“Back, back!”
Kyousuke more or less shoved the girls back to the next landing down.
“Curse those tomb raiders!!”
Gold-adorned Sekurtiti and Higan were crushed below Renge who groaned and asked a question while lying face down.
“Wh-what? Did they start using that machinegun again?”
“This was something else…”
Kyousuke alone remained on the stairs and he poked his head out into the floor which had been given much better ventilation. Something was maintaining a circular course around the apartment and he initially mistook it for a fairy.
But it was not.
He saw long, curly, and reddish-blonde hair. He saw a pale and small body. And that slender girl was covered in a mountain of sinister weapons. A swimsuit-like console suit covered her body, a giant dragonfly wing unit was attached to her back, and an additional coffin-like device larger than her leg was attached to each leg. The two coffins seemed to contain some large payload and countless heavy weapons stuck out like the frame of a folding fan: a machinegun, a rocket container, a needle gun, a flame thrower, a railgun, a close-range welding blade, a wire shooter, an acoustic weapon cone, etc. The silhouette was reminiscent of a Western multi-tool that stored screwdrivers and knives in the grip of a pair of pliers.
“Azalea…”
His eyes met the triumphant eyes of a giggling girl.
She pointed at him with a handgun gesture.
“Azalea Magentarain!!”
The fan-like spread of weapons all bent to focus their aim on him. Kyousuke felt a chill down his spine, but then something strange happened. He heard a footstep from right next to him.
“Then allow me to punish this rude tomb raider just like before.”
It was Sekurtiti, the silver-haired and brown-skinned Tomb Priestess.
She stood tall and directed her pale blue eyes and her hands forward.
“Hahhhhhh!!”
This was the ruler’s “wall” that had guided the autocannon gunner to a malfunction before.
This was a crystallization of the skills mankind had spent all of history developing to stand above others.
But Azalea’s smile remained unchanged. Her handgun gesture moved. The index finger moved slightly upwards as if recreating the recoil of firing.
“You idiot!!”

Kyousuke grabbed at Sekurtiti's skinny waist and tackled her to the floor. Their momentum sent them rolling along the dangerous floor, but there was nothing he could do about that.
Excess electricity wrapped around the barrel as the railgun gave a roar. With an air-splitting blast, the reinforced concrete was blown away almost amusingly easily. That also destroyed the emergency staircase up to the next floor. Kyousuke was worried about Renge and Higan on the next landing down, but he did not have time to go down and collect them. With that power, Azalea could blast through the floor and blow away the landing, so he would have no cover. And it would be best not to inform Azalea that the shrine maiden twins were there.
"…Oh?"
"Just keep your head down!!"
Sekurtiti calmly tilted her head like a young wife in front of the ATM after forgetting her PIN, so Kyousuke grabbed her arm and kept low while running across the floor. The thin inner walls would not work as shields, but remaining where Azalea could see them would be suicide. Even if it was only a thin wall, it would be best to vanish into a blind spot.
He heard what sounded more like an amplified version of a buzzing killer bee than a dragonfly.
He peered around the edge of the crumbling wall and looked into the sky which was no longer covered by glass.
Azalea could have flown into the apartment if she wanted, but she remained outside. She followed a circular course around the building and kept a set distance while making slight shifts to the left and right. That was likely the best course of action when attacking a high-rise building with an attack helicopter. She was avoiding the Summoning Ceremony and attempting to turn Kyousuke and the others to mincemeat before they could take advantage of a Material or the protective circle.
This routine was different from when her pride had caused her noble blood to boil.
A bitter look came over Kyousuke as he realized that defeat may have taught her how to change the way she used her power.
"That's based on the Meganeura, a Quad Motors personal flight unit, but I thought that was only a mobility support device for infantry and was derived from a hang glider. She's added way too much crap on there, dammit."
"Whatever the case, the entire apartment will collapse if she keeps this up. The tomb keepers waiting down below will be crushed, so we need to do something and soon."
"I know that."
With their opponent in the air, it would indeed be hard to start a Summoning Ceremony battle, but hard was not impossible. The Artificial Sacred Ground was a 20 meter cube that appeared from the point of the Incense Grenade detonation. So even if Azalea was in the air, he could trap

her in a summoner's cage if he threw the Incense Grenade when she had another building's wall behind her.
It was all about timing.
Step one was making sure Azalea did not notice what he was up to. If she found out he was trying to start a Summoning Ceremony battle, she would grow cautious of the buildings behind her.
Also, there was a waiting period of several seconds between pulling the Incense Grenade's pin and its detonation. The ones Kyousuke carried now took 5 seconds. That might not seem very long, but it was plenty of time for any one of the weapons spread out from Azalea's demonic legs. For example, the machinegun could fire 2000 shots every minute and each shot was twice the size of an anti-materiel rifle bullet. Without a protective circle around him, half his body would be blown away if one so much as grazed his shoulder. 5-10 such weapons were pursuing him, so he could not be optimistic about those 5 seconds. He had to assume that single Meganeura had more firepower than an entire unit of attack helicopters.
Thoughtlessly challenging it would not lead to a miracle occurring.
Kyousuke used his Repliglass Blood-Sign to swiftly pull in a fire extinguisher sitting a short distance away. But that was not enough on its own. He focused on the nerves in his ears and heard a dangerous sound coming from multiple locations. It was not Azalea. I came from within the floor which had almost entirely lost its walls and pillars like some ruins bombed down to the foundation.
(That's from the remnants of the kitchen and bathroom. There's gas leaking from both areas.)
He grabbed two bent cellphone batteries and metal clips from the rubble on the floor. And fire was readily available.
He slowly exhaled and made a suggestion.
"You need to set things up so we won't die in the 5 seconds after I throw the Incense Grenade. Create a smokescreen with the fire extinguisher and then throw some fire into the kitchen and bathroom to trigger an explosion. If Azalea is distracted by the light and noise long enough, then we win. If she's unfazed, then this will be considerably more difficult. Prepare yourself."
"Y-yes. Anything is fine if we can strike back at the tomb raiders."
She never had a choice in the first place.
Even so, Kyousuke waited until after Sekurtiti nodded to reach into his pants pocket and pull out the Incense Grenade their lives depended on. It looked like a hair spray can with a round pin and lever on the top. Anyone unfamiliar with his industry would probably think it was a flash grenade.
He waited for the right moment.
After learning of defeat, Azalea would not let her guard down. She was not a ferocious beast that knew no enemies; she was an injured beast. She refused to get too close and focused on killing him with every bit of firepower available to her.

Kyousuke pressed up against one of the few remaining inner walls and grabbed the Incense Grenade and its lever in one hand.
He passed his other hand's index finger through the round pin and toyed with it by alternately bending his finger like a hook and straightening it.
Sweat dripped down his nose.
Next to him, Sekurtiti wiped the sweat away like he was a doctor performing surgery. He focused every nerve in his body to pick up the amplified killer bee noise coming from the outside.
(Come on…)
The way he focused on his opponent may have been like a cameraman trying to get a shot of a total solar eclipse. He gulped as he watched the sunlight reflected off the opposite building and waited for another shadow to cover it up.
(Come on!!)
The light bent.
The surface of white light on the flat glass wall gained the dark silhouette of a curly-haired girl's slender and alluring body combined with heavy weaponry.
Kyousuke and Sekurtiti seemed to burst from the wall as they began moving.
The diversion was gold-adorned Sekurtiti's job. She threw the fire extinguisher from behind cover and threw a battery wrapped in cloth and set on fire into the remains of the kitchen and bathroom. Azalea fired a spray of machinegun fire each time, but not all of the traps had to work properly. All that mattered was that the heavily-armed Meganeura was focused elsewhere.
At the same time, Kyousuke pulled the pin of the Incense Grenade he held, leaned out from behind the thin wall, and threw the metal can out into the sky with all his might.
Once it was shot, the fire extinguisher's white smokescreen filled the floor. The ignited batteries failed to trigger any explosions, but the machinegun bullets that followed them did ignite the leaking city gas.
The Incense Grenade passed right by Azalea without being shot down and collided with the other building wall behind her. It bounced, rotated, and then detonated.
"Here we go, Sekurtiti! Get ready!!"
The summoner and vessel would be automatically taken the point of the detonation, but they could not let their guard down. If there was a piece of rebar sticking out in their path, they would be skewered. There was also a risk of Azalea's gunfire hitting them. Physical attacks would only be negated once they landed on the wall, hit a White Thorn, and summoned a Material. Their risk was the same as those summoners who he and Biondetta had taken out with their Blood-Signs earlier. He could not help but sense his own genes in Azalea now.
But that proved to be the least of his worries.

The child had exceeded her parent's expectations.
Nothing happened. Even though the Incense Grenade did detonate.
Even Kyousuke was caught off guard by this. He had thrown the Incense Grenade and it had detonated while he was viewing her with the naked eye and while she was within range of the Artificial Sacred Ground, but the Artificial Sacred Ground he needed did not appear. Nor did he feel the tugging that ignored gravity.
(It failed!? But why would it-…?)
Before he could verbalize his question, that skilled summoner worked out the answer. There was only one explanation for this unreasonable result.
Repliglass was a bestselling weapon all around the world that used silicon stem cells to take on the structure of plants and animals.
And a summoner could only fight a Summoning Ceremony battle with another human. He could destroy a tank or fighter that happened to be inside the same Artificial Sacred Ground and a dragon's breath or a stone thrown by a giant could leave the Artificial Sacred Ground and destroy the city, but he could not open an Artificial Sacred Ground by targeting a completely unmanned weapon.
Which meant…
"I thought that thing exposed too much skin for a logical and efficient weapon. I mean, it uses a swimsuit-like console suit without a helmet to cover the face or head. But I was wrong."
The weapon calmly moving horizontally through the sky with its dragonfly wings once more targeting him.
No, the heavily-armed Meganeura was not the dragonfly shape itself.
"Is that tomb raider what I think it is…?"
There was another reason why Sekurtiti's techniques as a leader had showed no effect.
Simply put…
"Is the whole thing Repliglass, *including Azalea inside it*!? Did she realize an Incense Grenade wouldn't work against an entirely unmanned girl-shaped weapon!? Dammit!!"
Immediately afterwards, the inhuman Repliglass modelled after a *human* opened fire.

Part 3

An irregular tremor shook the building.

The tomb keepers cried out while waiting on the ground floor. The only one looking calmly toward the ceiling was Biondetta in her modified yukata with her silver Blood-Sign resting on her shoulder and the white serpent slithering across her body after emerging from the ample cleavage left exposed like an Oiran.
Several cracks ran through the walls and a piece of concrete fell right next to her. And on this ground floor, a great mass of seawater awaited beyond a single pane of glass like in an aquarium. If that broke, the entire floor would be flooded.
But the horned demon was not at all tense as she moved her bewitching lips.
“That bastard ran into trouble, didn’t he?”

Azalea Magentarain giggled inside the logistical support Hornet. She was not wearing a revealing swimsuit-like console suit. Her curly blonde hair was worn up, revealing the nape of her neck, and she wore a blue yukata as if she had come to Toy Dream 35 to enjoy the current campaign. The kimono was somewhat baggy, but it was short, it had gothic lolita lace and frills in places, and it used a rose and thorn pattern.
She used a hand in a white glove to brush back her reddish blonde hair and she smiled.
“Now, how do you like my life-size figurine, my – dear – father? I did my best to recreate everything from the budding breasts and slender waist to the alluring color and texture of the skin. I hope you were suitably bewitched.”
“That is a perfect creation, milady.”
“Yes, but it will only fool him the one time. That does not make up for the R&D costs. Regardless, this will have opened the way to the Founder’s Gallery.”
When she slapped her small hand on the Hornet’s wall, several Repliglass weapons slid down from metal rails and out the rear cargo door.
They were all identical Serial Azaleas. They were fully unmanned anti-summoner weapons that combined a girl’s slender form with a heavily-armed Meganeura. There was no more need to keep up the act, so a large number of them could be sent in to directly attack inside the apartment.
Explosive flames and black smoke burst from the apartment building in every direction.
The entire building would probably collapse soon, but Azalea still did not let her guard down.
“Tell The Saint that our trick was effective, but that it is not enough to finish off Shiroyama Kyousuke. Tell her to prepare the Offering Team as planned.”
“Yes, milady.”
“And we will head directly to the scene.”

Azalea gave her instructions and then stored the #6 ribbon's pink reel in the chest of her yukata. The already opened chest of the baggy yukata was pushed dangerously loose.
"Milady."
"Hm? Oh, excuse me. I'm just not used to Japanese clothing. There are no buttons or zippers, so you only have a thick cloth belt to hold it shut. But it's also quite interesting."
With that quiet comment, the slender fingers of her fine white gloves fixed the yukata chest and then she took the giant metal cylinder that the elderly butler handed her. It was based on an 80mm grenade launcher and she rested it on her shoulder.
She was finally ready to launch an Incense Grenade for the Summoning Ceremony.
Just like in their previous battle, she leaned out the opened cargo door on the side of the Hornet and targeted with an optical sight that simply used a series of lenses.
"But Shiroyama Kyousuke might not be our only opponent here."

The shrine maiden twins Meinokawa Renge and Higan grew pale on the stairway landing.
They did not fully understand what was happening, but they could tell it was something unexpected. Specifically, something that *Shiroyama Kyousuke* found unexpected. That was far beyond anything they could handle.
"Wh-what are we supposed to do, um, Renge?"
"I'm not sure…"
They had two options: go up or go down.
Trying to join the fight would only get in Kyousuke's way, so hurrying down to join Biondetta and the tomb keepers would not be a bad decision. Setting aside any emotional or psychological arguments, that would help Kyousuke and Sekurtiti from a logic and efficiency perspective.
But the twin sisters were held in place by what Kyousuke had said. They did not know that Alice (with) Rabbit had made a change of plans and decided to battle Azalea. They still thought the plan was to use an Incense Grenade, summon a Material, destroy the upper floors, drop rubble into the ocean, and break through Bridesmaid, so they assumed he would need their help. So they could not betray him. They could not leave him there.
"Let's go on up, Higan. We need to end this as soon as possible."
"R-right…"
Was that step a courageous thing, or was it reckless and foolish?
But their fate may have been the same no matter what choice they made. They had been targeted from the beginning.
Targeted by the beautiful golden bird of prey known as Azalea Magentarain.

Part 4

The air was split by a sound much like the expulsion of insecticide smoke for roach-extermination fumigation. Kyousuke and Sekurtiti had changed position to throw an Incense Grenade outside, so they could only watch as the projectile flew straight in through the window.
The many shots into the floor had destroyed almost all of the inner walls, so the family apartment had been half-transformed into a single giant space. The projectile trailed smoke as it cut across that entire space and fell toward the emergency stairway.
And right toward Renge and Higan who had just poked their heads up.
“An Incense Grenade…dammit!!”
It detonated just as Kyousuke frantically adjusted his grip on his Blood-Sign. The 20 meter cube opened around the surprised shrine maiden twins. It was an Artificial Sacred Ground. And a pair entirely ignored gravity as they followed the trail of smoke into the mansion.
Azalea Magentarain.
Fractal Leskins.
The girl glanced over at Kyousuke in midair and her eyes were bent in a smile far too seductive for her age. Her curly blonde hair and mini yukata that blended Japanese and Western styles fluttered in the wind, showing off the bright skin of her bared shoulders and up to the base of her thighs. Hers was a slender and lovely wickedness and that sadistic light reminded Kyousuke of a certain white evil.
Those former Government Award 930 monsters landed next to Renge and Higan before the twins could fight back in any way.
After the soles of Azalea’s long boots scraped on the floor, she reached toward the open chest of her yukata and pulled out a ribbon reel in a risqué fashion.
The pink ribbon spiraled around on its own and formed a sturdy Blood-Sign. The initial stock of 3 White Thorns floated nearby and the wounded ruler smiled fiercely.
“Now, shall we begin? It is all to make Shiroyama Kyousuke suffer and nothing more.”
“I don’t think so!! Higan!!”
This won’t lead anywhere good, honestly thought Kyousuke.
Letting Azalea and Renge fight was a bad idea. Because the entire floor was opened up, he was far removed from the emergency stairs. He was outside the Artificial Sacred Ground. If he was going to join the fight after it began, he would be forced to use up his initial 3 White Thorns, but he could not be

picky now. If he did not join the fight, 300-level Renge and Higan did not stand a chance.
But as if to mock that thought of his, Azalea knocked a White Thorn into the collection of Roses and sent the countless red balls scattering around. And she made an announcement in her modified mini-yukata with a large flower decoration on the back.
“Could the crude gentleman please leave? Shiroyama Kyousuke, we have some other opponents for you.”
“…”
Was it more of those Azalea-shaped Repliglass weapons? He looked to his surroundings, but…
“The Saint, this is your job. Send in the Offering Team.”
The sound of buzzing wings was far louder than before. The mid-sized transport Repliglass known as a Hornet had flown up right alongside the destroyed apartment. The side cargo door opened to reveal a nun with her seductive body contained in a graceful habit. When she snapped her fingers, similar nuns appeared. Unlike The Saint, they were not complete individuals. They were all young girls who were just beginning to build up their individuality inside the convent. The height did not seem to bother them at all as they jumped calmly over the pure stream of air and into the building.
Kyousuke assumed they were new summoners or something like that, but it did not matter. Getting inside Azalea and Renge’s Artificial Sacred Ground came first. He was used to fighting against a group on his own, so he could still fight just fine even if the nuns intervened as well.
“Offering Team, begin special action. The Lord may not forgive you, but Her Majesty will surely accept your entire being.”
Or so he thought.
But The Saint’s voice smoothly continued.
“Pierce your own chests. And make sure that Alice (with) Rabbit has a good view.”
His breath caught in his throat.
Even then, the situation was underway. Those incomplete nuns looked downright adorable, but then they all tore the fabric covering their chests. They did not seem to care that this revealed their sensual breasts covered by the unfashionable underwear that had likely been issued to them. They held what looked like Blood-Signs, but they were not actually Blood-Signs. The tip had been replaced by something like a sharply pointed wooden stake.
They did not hesitate.
Each of the 20 or so young girls pressed the bottom of their modified Blood-Sign against the floor and placed the sharp tip against the center of their own chest. They then leaned forward as if to place their full body weight on it.

If they really were nuns, this would be an unforgivable act. The monotheistic religion symbolized by the cross might allow martyrs who risked their life for their faith, but it did not allow suicide. But based on what The Saint had said, they seemed to expect the Queen to accept their soul even if their god abandoned it. And yet that evil would never pay any attention to the puny 7 billion people on this planet!!
On one side were Meinokawa Renge and Higan who had once risked their lives alongside him.
On the other side were suicidal nuns he had never met who belonged to a Queen worshiping cult.
It was obvious which one he needed to prioritize. There was no need to hesitate. But at the same time, he was Alice (with) Rabbit. No matter the situation, he could not allow any death. From enemy or ally. And since this had clearly been caused by one of the White Queen's distortions, he had to stop it at all costs. His soul was raging inside him.
This was a countermeasure put together with a perfect understanding of the life form known as Shiroyama Kyousuke.
This Queen worshiping cult was the Queen and Kyousuke's "child". At the same time, it was an endlessly sinister thing.
"Kh…"
Time passed even as thoughts raced through his mind.
He could see Renge and Higan having trouble against Azalea. They were right in front of him and he could save them with a single action, but more than 20 nuns were trying to take their own lives around him. They were victims who had been so blinded by the Queen's false light that they forgot all about their original god and came to believe this was true salvation.
"Goddammiii

Renge and Higan did not have any hard feelings over his choice to distance them from salvation. They felt this was how it should be. They were summoners but also shrine maidens. Even if the god they worshiped and the scriptures they followed were different, they could see through to the essence of any who entrusted themselves to their god.
These girls who had chosen suicide were different.
They were not worshipers of the Queen and they were not even nuns whose souls had been polished in a convent.
They were probably no more than girls gathered at random within Toy Dream 35 who then had their sense of self temporarily taken away by incense, suggestion, and group psychology. One point the religious wished to reach was to remain unfazed by anything, but that was not the same thing as containing nothing whatsoever inside. These girls clearly had no god at the core of their being.
And Renge and Higan were also professional summoners.
Their skill might not have been at the 900 level and they might not have reached the point where they could become their own legend, but they knew which way the scales would tip when the life of an amateur was weighed against that of an expert.
So they had to remain resolute to the very end.

“Oh, it’s so adorable that you would think that.”
The Artificial Sacred Ground had already vanished.
Azalea and Fractal reigned supreme on that rubble-strewn floor. The pink ribbon unraveled and trailed along the floor where the shrine maiden sisters lay collapsed on their sides like broken dolls as they slowly repeated the same action with empty eyes. Renge was probably still trying to fight even now. The way she clenched her hands and thrust them forward looked a lot like using a Blood-Sign.
When Azalea snapped her white-gloved fingers, her elderly butler did not utter a single complaint as he picked up the twin shrine maidens and held them under his arms like they were the girl’s overstuffed vacation bags.
Kyousuke had only just finished knocking out the last of the suicide squad known as the Offering Team.
“Azalea…”
“Oh? How rare of you to be giving that look to anyone other than Her Majesty. Have you finally decided to give me the time of day?”
She viewed attention from Shiroyama Kyousuke as a positive thing.
Those were the Queen’s eyes. They were filled with wickedness.
“Do you finally understand what we’re after here? We don’t know what form the ancient map takes, so we could not just bring down the entire apartment building. But that is also what you are after. I thought you might run out clutching the ancient map if we poked at the building from outside, but…oh, I see. So it takes that form, does it?”

As the Queen began to reside within them, Azalea's eyes turned toward the brown girl accompanying Kyousuke.
…And at the same time, the logic and efficiency in those eyes was the same as Kyousuke's.
A smile spread across the face of that monster who had become a child born from the White Queen and Shiroyama Kyousuke.
"And I now have two bargaining chips that work exclusively on you: Meinokawa Renge and Meinokawa Higan. You don't mind trading the Diamond Master Key for one and the ancient map for the other, do you? This is checkmate."
She had it all.
Azalea Magentarain was on an entirely different level from the summoner he had once fought who had been manipulated by her inexperienced pride. She now carefully observed her enemy, lined up every method available to her, and threw out all pride and honor to unhesitatingly grab for the optimal answer. Kyousuke and the Queen had done this. They had transformed her into an irredeemable monster.
"What are you all trying to do with the Founder's Gallery? I'm not talking about your ultimate objective. I already know it's to be loved by the Queen. But what specifically are you going to do with it!?"
"The Natural History's missing entries."
"Kh."
"That strays from Bridesmaid's primary path, but I am sure everyone will accept it. And you will soon understand exactly why they will accept it."
The amplified sound of buzzing killer bees shook the air.
"You might not be carrying the Diamond Master Key with you, so we will be leaving for now. I will send you an invitation to the next party. Make sure you do not forget the Diamond Master Key and the ancient map when you show up. I will be opening the chest on the spot, so don't think you can trick me with detailed fakes. And for each part of that dress code you fail to obey, one of the shrine maiden twins will lose their life, so think very carefully about what you plan to do."
A Summoning Ceremony battle only worked with both a summoner and a vessel.
Kyousuke prepared to throw his Blood-Sign like a javelin to hit Fractal between the eyes, but then someone else interfered.
One of the Azalea-shaped Repliglass weapons flew in from the side and opened fire with a machinegun. A giant sewing machine seemed to pierce holes in the floor to separate Kyousuke and Sekurtiti from Azalea, Fractal, and the twins. The entire emergency staircase near the outer wall was torn away and his nemesis was thrown outside.
The wind caught Azalea's modified yukata and it blew wildly around her. The afterimage of the bright skin visible from the bared shoulders, open chest, and short hem were burned into the eyes of everyone watching.

Kyousuke ran across the floor as fast as his legs would take him, but several Azalea-shaped weapons swarmed in like a flock of seagulls. The falling summoner and vessel and the defeated shrine maidens they held were collected by the unmanned weapons and then taken away into the sky along with the Hornet.
There was nothing he could do.
Unlike the past, it was Kyousuke who had to slam his Blood-Sign against the floor and watch her leave.

Part 6

The Serial Azaleas had superb specs. Even when carrying a burden in both hands, they could match the speed of the flying Hornet, land inside the cargo door, and stow themselves away.
“Excellent work, milady.”
“Yes, you too.”
The Hornet had a lot of cargo space given its overall size, but it was still cramped once the several Serial Azaleas returned. Especially when two hostages who mindlessly repeated the same action were included.
“…Hee hee hee.”
“Milady?”
The elderly butler’s tone rose as a question at the end of the word, but the laughing modified yukata girl did not reply for a while. She held her small shoulders in her arms, doubled over, and still could not suppress the powerful tremor that rose from the core of her body. The large flower decoration shook while supported atop her hips like a ball.
Her determined face may have been small enough to inspire a protective desire inside those who saw it, but it was now filled with sinister delight. No, it might be better to simply say her face melted with a kind of pleasure wholly inappropriate for her age. Even as her lips started to grow slack, she desperately tensed them, but she had no way of hiding the sweet scent coming from her curled hair or the flushed nape of her neck.
“Fwah ha…ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”
Her shoulders had already been bared and a dangerous amount of her modest chest’s bright white skin spilled from the yukata, but she did not care. In fact, she had a sadistic look of irresistible enjoyment.
“Did you see the look on Shiroyama Kyousuke’s face? The hostages as well as the key and chest he needs to reach the Natural History’s missing entries were right there, but he could only helplessly clench his teeth. He was like a

lowly dog forbidden from devouring the feast before his eyes by the chain around his neck!! Yes, yes. This is Shiroyama Kyousuke. This is how to truly enjoy him. Outdo him, take everything away from him, and trample on him! Oh, such a liberating feeling! Oh, such an almighty feeling!! This amusement must by why Her Majesty can't stop loving him!!!!!"
Still doubled over, Azalea backed up and pressed her small butt against the bulkhead. She may have been laughing so hard her legs were growing weak. She then slid her hips down to the floor and kicked her slender legs around in their garter belt, white stockings, and long boots. Her modified yukata's short hem provided a view nearly up to the base of her thighs.
"…"
"Her Majesty resides within me right now. I can feel her joy like I'm holding it in my hand. …Nnnn! Pant, pant. I am truly grateful to have a gentleman like you here. If I was alone, I would be unable to contain myself and might even begin a shameful act…"
The small girl was supposedly holding her own shoulders, but the slender fingertips in her white gloves were wriggling like independent creatures. She felt like she was resisting the pull of a powerful magnet, so if she let her guard down even for a moment, they would crawl over toward her flat chest.
Of course, Azalea had not always been like "this".
The elderly butler named Fractal had originally served a man named Claude Magentarain. That man had sacrificed the many things he owned to save Azalea. The girl had never seen the man since. So to repay Claude for everything he had given up for her, she had wanted to use her life toward some great achievement.
That great achievement was the White Queen.
But that light had been too powerful, so it had blasted the footing out from under her and distorted how she defined her world. She probably no longer saw any distinction between her heart's original attraction to Claude and its later attraction to the Queen. She simply wanted them. Enough to devour… no, enough to drown in. She had shown signs of recalling something more pure after her defeat against Shiroyama Kyousuke, but even her pursuit of that had led to the Queen.
Even in the unrealistic amusement park city of Toy Dream 35, military Repliglass weapons flying around the sky in broad daylight would stand out. It was also possible she had been detected by the Government and Illegal forces that had taken root in the city.
But that did not actually matter.
A much louder sound of buzzing wings passed by directly overhead.
More than 200 identical Hornets were circling randomly above Toy Dream 35. And they were releasing tons of deception weapons, so the control towers would see more than 10 times as many dots on the radar. This was of course a diversion and they would slip past the eyes of everyone

watching, land in the many Blue Whale Repliglass submarines waiting on the ocean surface, and disappear to the ocean bottom.
Azalea and the others still had work to do in Toy Dream 35, so they could not do the same. They would disembark at a rooftop along the way and leave the pandemonium in the sky.
One of their allies had prepared bags on the corner of the rooftop, hidden behind an industrial air conditioner unit. The elderly butler stuffed the two hostages into a suitcase and a duffel bag and then calmly followed after the ringlet curl girl.
The giant bridges between buildings were packed full of boys and girls wearing yukatas and jinbei for the Tanabata fair. Azalea was a foreigner and her yukata was a striking fusion of Japanese and Western designs, but she still did not stand out much. Toy Dream 35 was a foreign-owned tourist city, so people from other countries were catered to with things like signs written in the alphabet.
“You should have tried wearing Japanese clothing too.”
“This is my formal dress as your servant and it also binds me as a vessel.”
There were an awful lot of students for midday on a weekday, but that was likely due to the Hornets flying around overhead. The high-rise apartment had been attacked by summoners, but that did not erase the gunfire and explosions.
“Oh, Fuuki-san! You came!!”
“Shut up, you brat. Why do I have to babysit you to and from school too?”
A girl with long black hair and a red blazer was pulling on a small boy’s hand.
That meant the schools had called off classes for the day given the major incident. There was clearly something wrong with the country’s crisis management skills. Why were they releasing the children into the streets when there was a firefight occurring in the streets?
Azalea continued on to their base as she gave an exasperated sigh, passed by some tourists busy aiming their smartphones overhead, and took a round fan with a diagram of the summer constellations on it when a Gozaru Samurai costume handed it to her. Everyone around her was raising their head and defenselessly exposing their throat as if offering that vital point up to her.
For a frontline base in Toy Dream 35, they had chosen a haunted house modelled after a Western mansion built on a plaza-like suspended platform. They of course did not use the passageways meant for guests. The haunted house was known to have countless backstage passageways for staff, but not even the staff visited a lot of the space inside. There was a machine room that stored the giant gears and winches that controlled the largescale electronic attraction. Needless to say, the staff avoided that area because there was plenty of risk of getting caught in the exposed machinery. But if one knew where the dangerous spots were, they would have a decently

large space all to themselves. It was a little scattered about, but the space was about the same size as half a school building.
“We’re back.”
“That was quick.”
The reply came from The Saint in her graceful nun’s habit. Her only job had been sending in the Offering Team, so she had returned a little sooner.
“As planned, we have the ‘packages’.”
Azalea’s frilly sleeve swayed as she pointed a thumb over her shoulder. The elderly butler held a duffel bag and suitcase under his arms. And they were both just big enough to contain a small girl if her arms and legs were curled up.
“We will soon send an invitation to Shiroyama Kyousuke, so come up with a site to make the trade.”
“Understood.”
Make no mistake: their frontline base was not where they would make the trade. The enemy would know the location of the trade once the invitation was sent, so it had to be a disposable location. They would have to send someone in to investigate it ahead of time and clean up afterwards, but they wanted somewhere they would not otherwise need to visit before or after the trade. The conditions were somewhat different than for a secret base. They wanted a place where they would leave no trace, where they could monitor the entire area, where it was difficult for anyone but the enemy to intervene, and where they had multiple exits just in case. That sounded simple, but was actually quite difficult.
“Tell Doctor S that I am thankful. We may have been the ones to give the Serial Azaleas and the Offering Team an actual form, but the idea itself was incredibly valuable. To think *the* Shiroyama Kyousuke would falter like that.”
“Did you enjoy your taste of that rabbit dish?”

Azalea reflected on the tremor that rose from the core of her body with too much intensity to hide. It was like recalling the juicy flavor filling one’s mouth after tearing off a large mouthful of thick meat. She held her body in her hands, she doubled over, and yet she still seemed unable to contain herself. The open chest of her modified yukata was already growing even looser.
Fractal quickly spoke to her.
“Milady.”
“A-ahem!! …I apologize for that. Well, I can hardly complain if I think of it as taking even a small step closer to Her Majesty. My tongue is still nowhere near as refined as that of a gourmet like Her Majesty, though.”

“My, it was that great? Then I might just have to try some of it myself. To feel something closer to Her Majesty’s happiness.”
“Let’s share it amongst us all. But we must make sure to restrict ourselves to no more than the occasional taste. Never so much that we earn Her Majesty’s wrath.”
The girl and nun both laughed while surrounded by a strange charm and allure.
Unlike the previous groups, a certain scent seemed to reside within them as they continued with their planning meeting.
“Fractal, remove the packages from their cases. We can’t have them dying.”
“Of course, milady.”
“Oh, dear. But isn’t abducting them enough?” asked The Saint. “Won’t Shiroyama Kyousuke appear before you whether they are alive or dead? He can’t see what happens here, so he wouldn’t know.”
“Yes, but that would be too boring.” Azalea pulled the chest of her yukata back together and brushed her golden curls back with a hand. “If they are not alive, I cannot take them from Shiroyama Kyousuke in front of his eyes. Wouldn’t that be Her Majesty’s way of doing things?”
“Oh, you are making me jealous now. Perhaps I too should have had a taste, even if just a mouthful.”
The Saint brought her index finger to her lips and narrowed her eyes in a spellbound look.
Meanwhile, the two shrine maidens were removed from the sealed bags. They were still in their 24 hours of mindlessness after suffering a defeat in the Summoning Ceremony, so they lay on their sides and slowly repeated the same action with empty eyes. There was no sign of their former personalities. If someone had pulled on their hands, they would not have hesitated to throw themselves into the gears which were taller than they were and would tear their bodies to pieces.
To make sure that did not happen by accident, Azalea sat down next to Renge, who was moving more than Higan, and clung to her upper body like she was hugging a stuffed animal. The slowly moving girl’s mind would be entirely empty now, but it still felt nice stopping that entirely pointless counterattack. The mechanically repeated motions of Renge’s arms and legs caught on Azalea’s yukata and threatened to pull it from her body, but she did not care. This was the joy of one who used their power to trample on others. She pressed her ear to the living sacrifice’s chest and slowly shut her eyes as she abandoned herself to the beating heart there.
“I will look after them for now. Contact me if anything happens.”
“Understood. I will begin searching for a suitable location for the invitation.”
After The Saint left, the elderly butler spoke to the girl.
“Milady, you will catch cold if you sleep there.”
“Heading to the bed now would be tasteless. More importantly, Fractal, bring me you-know-what.”

“…Milady.”
“Just do it. You know my tastes.”
With an exasperated sigh, Fractal Leskins briefly moved to the back of the machine room. By the time Azalea began to doze off while clinging to her large stuffed animal, he returned.
He held a cheap convenience store bag in his hands.
He gave a complicated look when his master’s eyes lit up and she hopped to her feet.
“I can fix you any kind of food you might like.”
“This is a different issue entirely, so I’m not insulting your skill. Make no mistake about that.”
She said that, but Azalea was so busy snatching away the bag and peeking in at its contents that she did not even look his way. The bag had a limited edition Tanabata design with super-deformed versions of Orihime and Hikoboshi drawn on it and it produced more and more mass-produced hot snacks: fried chicken, French fries, thick-cut bacon, fried fish, spring rolls, corndogs, and a strange type of popcorn that was popped only after ordering it. That last one was a new product with cheese or caramel powder that was poured in the bag and shaken into the popcorn. To drink, she had a zero calorie soda with tons of artificial sweetener in it.
Unlike before, her smile was now that of a child.
Even as part of a noble family, she secretly bought junk food as if rebelling against something. This was another side of the complicated girl named Azalea Magentarain.
She showed no annoying table manners and did not even use a fork or knife. She removed her white gloves and carefully wiped down each finger and then her palm with disposable napkins that used the antibacterial properties of bamboo leaves as part of the Tanabata fair. After that, she grabbed a fry that had an excessive amount of salt and grease and she tossed it into her mouth. She immediately squeezed her eyes shut and kicked her slender legs while still hugging her doll. The visible white of her thighs went beyond risqué and provided glimpses of a truly dangerous territory.
“Mmm, mmm, mmmmm!!”
As a butler, Fractal could say nothing when his master was enjoying herself so much.
Azalea moved on to eating some of the fried chicken and spring rolls, but then she changed her target. Just for fun, she held a piece of fried fish out toward the sacrifice she held in her arms.
“Whoops. Oh, this is surprisingly difficult… I can’t let it fall apart, which isn’t easy. Maybe I should have started with the fried chicken.”
She struggled for a while. Whether she noticed or not, the flower decoration on the back of her hips was swaying left and right to match the movements of her small butt. The empty-eyed black-haired shrine maiden’s lovely lips were glistening with grease and the chest of her shrine maiden outfit was

covered in crumbled flakes of fish, but she did not so much as move an eyebrow. She only slowly moved her arms and legs to repeat the same motion.
“Ah, she’s chewing!”
Azalea sounded like someone watching their new puppy eating for the first time. She finally succeeded in shoving the fried fish into the gap between the girl’s lips. It may have been some kind of reflex, but the shrine maiden touched the foreign object with her tongue, realized it was food, and started weakly and slowly moving her jaw. But instead of trying to swallow it, she let it start to spill from a corner of her mouth, so Azalea grabbed her skinny jaw and forced it to face upwards. This was a fairly dangerous thing to do, but it led the shrine maiden to swallow the fluid in the back of her throat.
Azalea narrowed her eyes and brought her small tongue to the index finger that had been touching Renge’s lips. She licked off the grease from the fried food.
And she spoke with a satisfied look of superiority.
“Hee hee. I think I’ll feed the blonde one later.”
“Do you like one of them better, milady?”
“Not really. But, well, the one with something I lack does seem more appealing. I wonder how she cares for that black hair. Does she use a different method from us? I am endlessly curious.”
Azalea pulled a corndog from the convenience store bag as she answered. She started to bring it to her doll’s mouth as well, but she must have decided the stick would make it dangerous because she gave up and stuck it in her own mouth instead.
This may have been another unfulfilled side of Azalea.
Magentarain was a noble family. She had many siblings who shared her blood, but she herself was an illegitimate child born of a commoner and she was the youngest of the siblings. She had been given few chances to interact with a family and she had not been blessed with a brother or sister younger than her. Feeding this girl…no, taking care of this girl may have been a subconscious replacement for that.
If Claude had not been “away”, she might have leaped right into his chest and had him adore her. Her eyes narrowed a little as she imagined that.
But Azalea Magentarain was a worshiper first and foremost.
Enough so that the Queen’s ecstasy filled her eyes and Kyousuke’s logic filled her thoughts.
If it was necessary for her goal, she would dispose of this soft replacement. In fact, she would do the same with her real family.
“Okay, Fractal.”
“Yes?”
She appeared to be dozing off as she felt the sacrifice’s pulse through her ear.

“Let’s begin our preparations here. We have two faithful servants who will do anything we want them to. Let’s do something that will truly make Shiroyama Kyousuke scream.”

Part 7

“Onii-chan…”
Inside a room that took up the entire top floor of a luxury apartment building, the slender bikini girl named Aika waved around two boxes of chocolates: one shaped like mushrooms and the other like bamboo shoots. This was a part of a hundred years’ war or an endless Armageddon, but the Tanabata fair had changed that somewhat. A limited edition advertised as “An overgrown bamboo shoot that forms a light stick of bamboo!” had been released, so the bamboo shoot version was going to be the winner for the time being.
As Aika cheerfully opened the boxes, Kyousuke flatly spoke to her.
“Do you need something?”
“The liger is super scared and cowering over in a corner, so could you lower the level of irritation in here? If you rode an elevator with a normal person right now, they’d probably suffocate to death.”
“Hm?”
Kyousuke looked over in surprise and found the 5 meter combination of a lion and white tiger was indeed in the corner. More than the king of beasts, this was an emperor who did not exist in the natural world, and yet she was trembling like a kitten out in the cold. Her tail was tucked between her back legs and her body language clearly said “please don’t look at me” in the cat language.
“Sorry, sorry, liger. This has nothing to do with you.”
“Onii-chan, if you really want to make up with her, you need to offer her an extra-large hunk of meat on the bone.”
“Yes, I suppose a frightened animal is supposed to be dangerous.”
Adventurer Shiroyama Kyousuke entered the tiger’s den with a giant club of meat that looked like a giant hunk of ham before it was made into ham. It was just like what one might see shown off at a Spanish restaurant.
And Biondetta did not betray anyone’s expectations.
That demon was more cruel than mischievous and she raised her hands behind Kyousuke.
“Wahh!! Crash, bang, boom!!!!!!”
“Hee! Are you trying to kill me, you idiot!?”

Right in front of history's greatest carnivore, Kyousuke and Biondetta started having something like a pillow fight using giant hunks of meat. Everyone's beloved big sister rolled around, causing some highly indecent things to occur at the chest and thighs of her mini-yukata.
On a sofa at the other side of the room, Modified China Dress Lu Niang Lan was curled up with her arms around her knees. She had gone entirely pale and no one would have believed this was the legendary assassin who had killed Government's Award 1000 after he became a global tyrant.
"It doesn't matter… I'll just find a way to shine in this position. Eh heh heh heh."
But this was no time to be goofing off.
Meinokawa Renge and Meinokawa Higan had been taken away by Bridesmaid who worshipped the Queen. He had to save them somehow.
"Excuse me."
They were all interrupted by the silver-haired brown girl who was too skinny to call slender, who wore gold decorations and red jewels, and who was wrapped in bandages and a Y-shaped cloth as thin as fairy wings. The way she took charge may have been from her position as a ruler.
"I would like to get down to business. I cannot abandon the summoner and vessel who helped save the tomb keepers under my command. As that irreverent lot holds the crucial cards and we do not know when the time limit will arrive, we cannot afford to waste even a second."
She argued from a position of responsibility just like a class representative. When the light of her pale blue eyes reached them, they all gathered in front of Sekurtiti. Even the frightened white liger obeyed her and sat in front of her.
After obediently sitting down, Kyousuke raised his hand for permission to speak.
"It is true that it looks like Bridesmaid is in complete control here. We don't know where Renge and Higan are, so we can't attack their hideout. But just waiting for their invitation earns 0 points as a plan. That leaves us no chance of taking them back."
"Meaning?"
"They need the Founder's Gallery. They even mentioned the Natural History's missing entries. They want the Diamond Master Key and the ancient map no matter what. That means they're sure to designate a location for a hostage exchange. …Of course, the odds of them returning the hostages safely are more or less 0."
"But what does that give us? They will choose the location, so they are still in control. If we complain about the location, it might lead Bridesmaid to harm the hostages. So aren't we stuck waiting regardless?"
"You're surprisingly hardheaded. You like to stick with the first step, don't you? Everyone will walk all over you in the world of the Summoning Ceremony where all sorts of monsters run rampant," interrupted Biondetta (who made sure to raise her hand first). "It's true that Bridesmaid is in

control with the hostages in their grasp, but this city is the home ground of my client and his Government and Illegal hangers-on. They know the area far better than outsiders like Golden Luxury or The Saint. And there are only so many locations in a city that will satisfy a professional for this kind of hostage exchange. My client and his hangers-on know Toy Dream 35 well enough to have likely thought up a few candidate locations right away."
Next was Swimsuit Aika who was giving a giant hunk of meat on the bone to the white liger who had calmed down by now.
"They're probably quickly searching out a delicious restaurant for their party and preparing to decorate it, but we only have to get ahead of them and buy up all those restaurants. Do that and we can stab them in the back before they're ready."
"Ah," said Sekurtiti with a surprisingly cute voice.
This may have been a glimpse of the girl before she had become half divine.
"To be blunt, this would never work out if we tried to turn things around after arriving at the stage Bridesmaid had already set for us. It would be like starting a chess game while already in checkmate and trying to turn it around from there. But things are different if we sneak around and make a surprise attack when the pieces are still scattered and the checkmate is not yet complete. We can reclaim control of the situation."
Coming up with the actual methods was a job for Aika in Government and Lu Niang Lan in Illegal. A projector displayed the data they had gathered onto the ceiling. This was one of the self-indulgent items installed for the swimsuit shut-in to surf the web while lying down.
"This is a crime prevention map that Government updates in real time."
"And this is a map of the patrolling police officers that Illegal keeps tabs on."
"This is a map of the areas controlled by the different factions within Government."
"This shows the territories of the different organizations and families that make up Illegal. Think of this map as the underground version of that last one."
"Honestly, Illegal's search system looks so dangerous."
"I don't want to hear any talk of righteousness from a group that used to be led by a scumbag who kept his vessels in animal cages."
"You're getting off topic," pointed out Kyousuke for a gentle course correction.
There were plenty of areas people rarely went, but comparing the 2 data sources eliminated most of those. People apparently already controlled the harbor or warehouses at night, as well as the party spaces at fancy restaurants or hotels. They looked private but were actually casually monitored, so no outsider professional would go there.
But there were a few areas not filled in by either color.
It would be hard to find somewhere not covered at any time around the clock, but they only needed somewhere that cleared out in the early

morning or late at night. After all, this was for an exchange and not a hideout.
“Here. This is the primary candidate.”
Kyousuke used a lecturer’s laser pointer to indicate a point on the ceiling map.
“Z Block’s metropolitan zoo. It’s empty from around midnight until the employees arrive at 6 in the morning, and no faction uses it for anything. The temperature is automatically controlled by heaters, so they barely have any nightshift staff. This meets the conditions we’re looking for.”
“And isn’t this the amusement park rumored to be haunted by the ghost of a girl who fell into a cage and was eaten by a lion, Onii-chan?”
“I’m pretty sure those rumors started when people saw you going out with your pet for late night trips to the convenience store.”
“Really, though. A faceless phantom girl in an amusement park? We’re not talking about The World’s Happiest Girl who was supposedly involved in the creation of the Toy Dream parks.”
“What was that again? Didn’t President Toydream create the amusement parks to match a new fairy tale he had written, but that fairy tale was never released and no one knows what the story is?”
“But I’ve heard the completed story is hidden somewhere in the Toy Dream cities scattered across the world. A lot of books end up in my Chinatown trying to pass themselves off as the real one. They even go out of their way to use authentic paper and ink like with those fake Da Vinci diagrams or Einstein journals…”
“We’re really getting off topic now…”
Aika actually steered them back on topic for once.
And it was Sekurtiti who resumed the discussion with a puzzled look on her face.
“Anyway, there is no guarantee Bridesmaid will choose this location, is there? There are plenty of other possibilities.”
“Yes. A quick glance here shows about 23 different suspicious spots.”
Kyousuke did not sound worried. “But nothing says we can’t eliminate their possibilities. Maybe there’s a small fire, an electric short, a gas leak, or a burst water pipe. We just have to cause some harmless but noticeable accidents to gather attention. The trick is to use enough variety that it won’t seem unnatural even when it happens at 23 places in a row. We’ll change the flow of people to ruin their ideal hostage exchange locations.”
Their time was of course limited, but there was no excessive rush in knocking out those candidate locations. Even if Bridesmaid had already decided on a spot other than the zoo, they would have to switch to another candidate if that one was eliminated.
Meanwhile, Kyousuke and the others could not put off dealing with the zoo itself. If they did not infiltrate the location ahead of Azalea’s group, they could not fool them.
Kyousuke immediately made up his mind.

“Let’s split into 2 groups. Biondetta, you take out the other candidates. Sekurtiti and I will infiltrate the zoo as a pair.”
“Yes, sir. I’ll give this my all☆”
“Lu-san, I need your help as a supply shop. Sekurtiti is ultra conspicuous in nothing but bandages, so get her some clothes.”
“Yes! Finally a job only for me that that pheromone waitress can’t do!!”
He ignored the sexy modified China dress as she trembled in mysterious joy.
“Azalea’s group might begin their party in as soon as an hour. Time is our enemy, so let’s get ready as quickly as possible.”

Part 8

The twin shrine maidens had been captured by a powerful enemy and they had no time.
But they did not need to rush into any kind of eccentric action during the preparation phase. Instead moving between buildings by clinging to a helicopter’s landing struts or swinging across on a wire, they bought a ticket at the station and rode a train to the zoo in Z Block.
“Celebrate Tanabata by giving bamboo grass to the pandas!”
“The Capybara Knights are also praying for a beautiful night sky!!”
The train was covered in hanging banners and electronic advertisements for the Tanabata Fair.
At this stage, they could not afford to stand out or be delayed. They bought tickets for the zoo and entered through the main gate like normal. Two high school tickets came out to 3200 yen. The basics were important.
“What is that electric noise?”
“Oh, that’s a bug zapper. Zoos end up with a lot of bugs, so they lure them all in to fry them.”
“Hm? But I thought those traps only worked at night. The bug zappers I am familiar with are a technology that takes advantage of insects’ attraction to lights. Pant, pant.”
“Why are you breathing heavily? My guess is this one uses smell as well. Fly and roach traps often use some kind of jelly.”
“Gasp! You mean this is a brand new kind of cutting-edge trap!? And a pure one that protects people’s smiles from disease. Kh. I never thought I would find these things even here. Japan truly is a great nation of traps!”
“You really are a pain in the ass, you know that!?”
He had a feeling he did not want to let her see one of those clockwork toys that rolled small metal balls around inside it.

Also, they had received something with their tickets.
“What is this? I have never seen this plant before. What as strange aroma.”
“I guess they don’t have these in northern Africa.”
“Is it a trap?”
“No, and shut up about traps. It’s called bamboo grass. It’s a type of bamboo, so-…”
“Bamboo spear traps! I’ve heard of that. They are the distinct Japanese flavor added to falling ceilings or pitfalls. They are the umami of traps, aren’t they!?”
“Try to control your heartrate, Sekurtiti. Anyway, this is the favorite food of the zoo’s prized pandas!”
It was noon on a weekday, but there were an awful lot of small children running around wildly with no concern for the flow of foot traffic.
“Did you write your wish on the *tanzaku*?”
“I heard the paper and ink are both made from bamboo grass.”
“I hope I found the Phantom Girl picture book. Now eat up, panda! Make my dream come true!!”
The number of children was too great to just be families that had taken time off of work and school, so it may have been a school field trip.
The air contained a unique mixture of straw and animal smells.

“Will such a bright place really be used for an ugly hostage exchange?”
Sekurtiti looked around doubtfully while wearing a primarily yellow yukata. She still wore the tiara and thus most likely still wore the other decorations and the bandages below, but she looked normal enough. She had brown skin and short silver hair, but she did not stand out much since there were a lot of Japan-loving foreign visitors to Toy Dream 35.
“Sekurtiti, the zoo is for looking at the animals, so try to keep your eyes on the cages.”
“Eh? Ah? R-right.”
“And summoners and vessels vanish from normal people’s minds once we’re out of view. The normal methods to lose someone tailing you might actually clue them in if they focus on the abnormal movements in the crowd.”
He grabbed the brown yukata girl’s hand. Since she was not used to this, it would be faster to escort her. And no one would find it odd to see a young boy and girl holding hands at the zoo.
“□□□□”
Yes, even if the brown ruler’s cheeks were flushed red.
Kyousuke walked around the zoo along the normal routes with Sekurtiti in tow.
“Um, are my clothes okay?”
“There are a lot of foreigners in Japanese clothing here, so you don’t stand out.”
“That isn’t what I meant… Perhaps I should try to act more like that proper Yamato Nadeshiko over there. Even from behind, she is practically oozing sex appeal.”
“No, wait. That’s a bad example. That’s no Nadeshiko. It’s Rendou Akiya.”
Kyousuke dejectedly viewed the yukata-wearing person walking gracefully through the crowd. He had guessed classes would be canceled at school due to the gunfight with Azalea’s group, but since that classmate (♂) was at the zoo in a yukata, he must have been meeting someone here.
On the way, they gave their bamboo grass *tanzaku* to the panda cage without writing anything on them.
Space was limited in Toy Dream 35, so most of their movement was vertical. The overall pathway spiraled downwards. The area was divided into 5 different layers with Layer 1 at the top and it looked something like one of those parking garage toys that let minicars run along rails.
Sekurtiti tilted her head when she saw the guide map.
“Lions, elephants, giraffes… They come from the same ecosystem, but their cages are scattered around. Why wouldn’t they gather the animals into an African section or a South American section?”
“It’s like the shelves at a supermarket. They want you to naturally visit the entire zoo to see what you want to see, so the most popular animals are spread out across the zoo. If they put the penguins, pandas, and capybaras all in one place, no one would ever go anywhere else.”
“A supermarket? So even Freedom Award 903 uses those?”

“Oh? Was that too much for the great Tomb Priestess?”
They stopped at the shop section that doubled as a souvenir shop and food court and they bought a sandwich set they could eat as they walked. For the Tanabata Fair, it was wrapped in antibacterial bamboo leaves instead of a clear plastic package. They would have stood out too much if they were not holding a pamphlet or some food. It would look odd to pay money to visit the zoo and then not enjoy themselves.
But there was a problem.
“Sekurtiti. I don’t know how you normally live. If you don’t like the food, you don’t have to force yourself to eat it.”
“No, this is one thing I want to challenge myself with. So do not worry.”
That phrasing left him even more confused as to how she normally lived. Surely she did not really live on nothing but mist and dew.
She must have always wanted to eat while standing because she leaned up against a wall near the shop section and had trouble choosing what to take from the set Kyousuke held. She finally pulled out the tomato and lettuce vegetable sandwich. After sniffing it a few times, she grabbed it in both hands and took a small bite from the corner.
Before she even swallowed, her pale blue eyes widened. Even Kyousuke could tell her body was moving below the yukata. It seemed like her organs were wriggling near her chest and navel.
“Nbh, nheh! Cough, cough!!”
“Sekurtiti.”
“N-no, I’m fine. I’m fine…”
She smiled, but there was a cold sweat on her forehead. He wanted to pass her a drink, but since she existed outside the Summoning Ceremony, he could not say if that would help or only make it worse.
“Phew… I can tell the flavor is not bad at all. In fact, it is extremely fascinating. That might change once I swallow it, but it is worth the challenge.”
A mint or some gum might have been the better choice, but he could hardly stop her touching efforts when he saw her continually tearing off small pieces and tossing them in her mouth like she was feeding a small bird. Kyousuke had to wonder if he would behave the same way if he was told he would be given 100 million yen if he ate the entire morning paper. She did swallow it, but he was worried about what would happen later. He decided to ask the tomb keeper elder. …Although that old man might punch him the instant he heard about it.
After spending a long time breaking the sandwich down like a jigsaw puzzle and swallowing it all, Sekurtiti forced a smile.
“Sorry about the trouble. Now, let’s go look at the rest.”
“R-right.”
It looked like she could not finish it, so Kyousuke ate his sandwich while she shared the rest of hers with a stray cat that had snuck into the zoo.
Even so, Sekurtiti narrowed her eyes and smiled.

“Do you like cats?”
“In Egyptian mythology, they are a sacred beast just as important as the crocodile and the leopard. How could I not like them? And while cats are loved the world over now, they are companions who originated in Egypt.”
That girl had taken one step away from the human world using a method other than reaching Award 1000. Hers was the achievement of a much older age than the Third Summoning Ceremony discovered in 1999. Kyousuke knew this was outside his field of expertise. Was that because he was only the strongest when standing on his stage with a Blood-Sign? Or because he was still partway through the 900s and had not yet seen Award 1000 for himself?
“It is nothing that special.”
Her voice seemed to see right through him. Sekurtiti herself pressed her palms against the railing and watched the lion in the concrete walls a few meters below. She watched that king of beasts yawn on the napping bed covered in straw.
“I am known as the Tomb Priestess and as a ruler, but I am the same as that beast in a cage. I only eat what food those with special knowledge have prepared and I can only wield my power within the field provided to me. It probably makes me look like quite the ferocious beast. After all, no one knows if I can actually run around the grassy field and catch prey with my own claws and fangs.”
“…That’s painful to hear.”
Kyousuke felt like she was talking about him. He was half the reason the world was what it was. That was not a lie, but if he was asked if he had walked all around the world to see if it had really changed, he would have to answer no. He only had the environmental changes he had predicted based on his theoretical calculations.
He was undoubtedly in the strongest position for “this world”. But how large was that “world” really? He was too deeply dyed in the colors of the Blood-Sign system’s “world” to judge anything outside of it.
Everyone had their own “world” and this was the path he had chosen.
But there was no definite standard with which to measure the superiority of his “world” to that of the person walking alongside him.

Part 9

Meanwhile, Oiran-style Modified Mini-Yukata Biondetta was stomping around Toy Dream 35's R Block with her boots. Of the pizza slice blocks of the city, this one had a relatively large number of schools.
"If your heart is brimming with justice, then let's get shooting!! Come study the stars with the Shooting Rangers and then we can combine our powers to defeat the Doshaburin Raincloud Monsters! Have you started up your cheering app? Orihime is Vega of Lyra and Hikoboshi is Altair of Aquila. Believe it or not, Orihime is 70 times brighter than the sun. She's said to be the brightest in the summer constellations. On the other hand, Hikoboshi is…"
A group of five in full-body tights was holding some kind of study session on one of the giant bridges. Instead of using a screen or monitor like the weather lady, a barcode of light appeared on their tights' decorations. The children could apparently hold up their smartphones to scan those codes to view the changing education text that went along with the hero show. The show itself was free, but the app needed to fully enjoy it came with a small fee. Even if the gadgets were new, the basic idea was the same as the old *kamishibai*. The cheap candy had just been replaced by the app.
It was mostly elementary school kids gathered around and no high schoolers were stopping for it.
"Oh, how nostalgic. Ryouko-chan, it's the Shooting Rangers. Which generation are they on now?"
"O-Onee-chan, don't stop here. It's too embarrassing."
"Oh, right. You always preferred Cuticle Star. Didn't you come begging me to braid your hair because of that pink magical girl in glasses named Milly-chan?"
"This is not helping with the embarrassment!!"
The demon walked right past a pair of high school girls in red blazers (one confident and short-haired and the other librarian-like with glasses and braids).
(This is all mixed up…)
Biondetta sighed as she walked through the crowd.
There were a lot of children for midday on a weekday, but that was because classes had been cancelled after the firefight with Azalea and the rest of Bridesmaid. So why were those children being kept out on the streets? It felt like leaving a bird cage out in the middle of the savanna, opening the door, and waiting for a wild beast to arrive.
However, Biondetta's objective was not to monitor the people or to instruct them on disaster management.
She was here to take out the candidates for Bridesmaid's throwaway hostage exchange location, leaving them with only the metropolitan zoo in Z Block.
It was not well-known, but schools were quite useful for such things. After all, there was generally no one there at night. And these days, they relied on their home security system and no teachers stayed behind. One only had to

know how to kill the electronic cameras and sensors. In fact, there were some places where overgrown trees or ill-placed signs had covered up those mechanical eyes. Find a careless and peace-dulled school like that and the underworld would attach a price tag to it.
(Those mothers in upside-down triangle glasses would probably faint if they knew guns, drugs, and women were being sold and bought at the schools they thought symbolized peace and safety, but that's the sad truth.)
Those who refused to hit a woman would be killed by a woman. Those who went easy on kids increased the value of child assassins. Those were the ironclad laws of the harsh world. People were free to support bushido or chivalry if they wanted, but pacifists needed to use their heads a little more and realize they could easily be indirectly supporting the underworld by leaving openings that the less principled could take advantage of.
And if Kyousuke and Biondetta had done so, they might not have become such perfect summoners.
(It doesn't really matter now, though. I can't have anyone taking this power from me.)
"Hm, hm, hm, hmmm☆"
The pink demon hummed as she took photos of her surroundings with her smartphone. Loitering around a school and pointing a camera around should have been alarming, but this was the tourist city of Toy Dream 35. It might be unusual for a woman to go on a foreign trip all on her own, but this was the age of SNS. If an attractive woman was wandering around taking a bunch of selfies, people would assume the horns on her head and tail on her butt were just a way for a showoff foreigner to get more hits on her page. No one would ever think to notice that the camera's focus was more on the buildings behind her and the security camera locations than on her own smiling face.
(This is an industrial technical college and, based on the schoolyard equipment, that must be a sports-focused school. Those would be tough. Ohh, there's a handy elementary school over there. Heh heh. They've kept the number of cameras low to protect the kids' privacy and elementary schools generally don't have club activities, so it'll be empty at night. They'll want to go after this one, so I need to seal it off.)
"Now, then."
Biondetta came to a stop. She turned her head and swiped her slender index finger along her smartphone's screen. Mobiles were so very convenient. Tourists no longer needed a physical map and she would look just like a tourist checking her destination on a digital map.
Even if the screen displayed something else entirely.
(Government and Illegal…hmm. This is an educational facility, so the world police probably have a greater presence. Although it looks like Illegal is using some bad people to start breaking into the area.)
She generally used the two maps they had seen in Aika's apartment, but the problem was how to use them.

She moved to the back of the school and found a small faculty entrance. Fortunately, there was a small bush right next to it.
“Good, good.”
Hanging from her shoulder was one of the light hiking rucksacks that foreigners often used when sightseeing and she stepped over the fence despite the short yukata and black knee socks showing off her thighs right up to the base. Her investigation had already found that a soundproof panel for construction created a blind spot in the cameras here. She approached the faculty entrance, lowered the rucksack, and unzipped it.
It contained a heavy metal cylinder, but it was not a water bottle refilled with tea.
“You shouldn’t be so careless, Azalea-chan. You can fire like crazy if you want, but leaving unexploded ordnance on the scene comes with its own risks. For example, they can be reused as IEDs☆”
What she had to do was simple: shove the unexploded missile into the bushes near the entrance and hit the remote switch when the Government dog dressed as a faculty member got close.
It would be a pain to sit around waiting for them to arrive on schedule, so she just had to call the faculty room without actually saying anything. If she hacked a student’s smartphone, spoofed the location data, and made it look like they were playing behind the school even after classes were canceled, the teacher would put their shoes on at the faculty entrance and step out to scold them. And that would mean passing right by the bushes hiding the unexploded ordnance.
Biondetta did not really have to kill them.
She could intentionally hit the switch while the target was still a good way away from the explosive. After just barely surviving, that ally of justice would first start a skirmish with Illegal and only start investigating Bridesmaid after identifying the explosive. Using unexploded ordnance left by someone else was just like using a hacked account: it brought such wicked enjoyment.
Her client Shiroyama Kyousuke had asked her to eliminate the candidates in a way that looked natural.
Biondetta had faithfully obeyed him.
To that pink demon, detonating bombs in the city still qualified as a “natural accident”.
But.
Just to be clear, Biondetta’s goal was destruction and not murder.
She wanted to disturb the scene enough that Bridesmaid could not use any of the candidate locations except for the metropolitan zoo in Z Block. And it had to be done quickly enough that obvious results would be seen in only a few hours.
She had found the best answer for that.
(After this, I guess I’ll attack an Illegal base. While pretending to be Government, of course. They’ll begin fruitlessly attacking each other and

they'll also reveal the existence of their common enemy: Bridesmaid. Hmm, it looks like those two enemies are going to heroically join forces. Such a silly but lovely and freeze-dried story!)

Part 10

In the zoo, Yukata Sekurtiti spoke with doubt in her pale blue eyes.
"By the way, Shiroyama Kyousuke. We've gone around making preparations, but what exactly are we going to do?"
"We need to finish checking around first. The zoo is a large facility with a hidden area they don't show the guests, so we need to check there too."
Just as Kyousuke said that, a female zookeeper made an announcement from the speakers installed along with lights on the branches of the trees lining the path.
"The 2 PM petting show with the popular Capybara Knights is beginning soon. This is the last time they will be fed today, so keep that in mind if you have purchased food pellets for them. All of the Capybara Knights will be making an appearance at…"
Children only as tall as Kyousuke's waist rushed over. The show seemed to be happening nearby. Yukata Sekurtiti let go of his hand as the stream of children separated them, but she gently narrowed her pale blue eyes like she was seeing something heartwarming.
And then the summoner raised his leg without hesitation.
He coldheartedly kicked right toward one of the children.
"?"
The brown girl's face was colored by an indescribable mixture of surprise and disgust, but the Tomb Priestess caught on a moment later. The right sleeve of her bright yellow yukata had been ripped apart. Not even bumping into someone and catching on their fingernails would do that.
A flash of silver light was mixed in with the sea of innocent children.
It was a knife. An unmistakably deadly weapon.
"Wha-? Eh?"
Sekurtiti held her torn sleeve and quickly took a step back, but the surrounding people had not even noticed anything was wrong. Most eyes were on the rodents released inside a short fence and Kyousuke alone stared coldly at the attacker.
His kick to the back of the elbow had caused the attacker to miss, but that attacker looked like a girl of only 8 or 9. Her long hair seemed more like ice than silver, she wore a long, sleeveless dress with a blue ribbon on the

chest, and she wore a backpack that resembled a stuffed tanuki which seemed to be a character from something. At first glance, it looked like a summery dress with fabric so thin that her small silhouette showed through, but that was a false image. In truth, an optical effect was used to make it look like her silhouette showed through while she actually had a variety of weapons hidden inside.
Unlike Sekurtiti, there was no shock on Kyousuke's face.
He only spoke with some annoyance in his voice.
"Those eyes. They remind me of my past."
They both jumped back to put distance between them.
"The Capybara Knights love plants that grow near the water and plenty of those have been put in the pellets all of you have. When you pick them up, go like this and…"
The children cheered at the zookeeper's explanation, but just a few meters behind them, an unrecorded fight to the death was beginning. Even though it was July, the assassin looked like a snow fairy and she reached for the backpack on her back. She pulled out what looked like a fishing reel, but it was much larger and more sinister.
(A windlass pike?)
The mass of steel was as solid as a vise and when the mine cart lever of a stopper was removed, something rapidly slid out. It was a weapon made by attaching a 250 cm special steel shaft on the back of a combat knife with a 20 cm blade. It had only fit in the backpack because the reel had been used to forcibly wrap the shaft around.
It was far too large a weapon for a girl with a height of only 120 cm.
But that impression was quickly overturned. Right or left. The girl stabbed the sharp point into the ground, held onto the special steel shaft, and swung around like a ballet dancer or figure skater, or like she was twisting a large man's arm around. Each time her large skirt fluttered up around her and the entire dress created a false image in the backlight, the shaft bent, spun, and built up strength. Finally, the girl used her toes to kick the tip she had stabbed into the ground.
The cocoon exploded.
The special steel shaft demonstrated the beauty of a rhythmic gymnastics ribbon as it rotated around and released its incredible power like a spring. It became a deadly blade storm that blew toward Kyousuke. It flipped vertically, horizontally, up, and down. It probably looked like a mere afterimage to a normal person. Not even a martial arts expert could produce this much speed and numbers.
But Kyousuke did not back down.
He pulled a metal cylinder the size of a hair spray can from his hoodie's pocket. Needless to say, it was an Incense Grenade, but he did not plan to pull the pin and throw it. Unlike his 180 cm Blood-Sign, he could use this blunt weapon while hiding it in his hand.

If his aim was even a few millimeters off or his timing was even 0.3 seconds off, this dangerous storm would take off all the fingers on his right hand. A few orange sparks scattered within it.
The ice fairy's deadly blade did not stop. Before the storm could settle down, the tip stabbed back into the ground and she twisted her body complexly around to build up power in the spring and seamlessly begin the next attack as her skirt fluttered around her. Any normal reaction would have been worn down and killed with no chance for a counterattack. Yes, any "normal" reaction.
This was why Kyousuke had chosen the Incense Grenade over his Blood-Sign.
"Are you sure you want to make me go all out?"
"?"
Kyousuke spread his arms in front of the attacker and showed off the scratched metal can he held.
"If this goes off, an Artificial Sacred Ground will open. I have a vessel with me, but you're alone. You might be an expert in that field, but you can't wield the Summoning Ceremony right now. …Letting this detonate would be devastating for you. Wouldn't it be awful to be crushed to death by the Cost 1 Original Red (b)?"
"!?"
The attacker's movements tensed for just a moment, but Kyousuke used that moment to step forward.
He did not actually have to make that choice. Making her think he had was enough. It was devastating enough to simply driving a wedge into her seamless movement between attacks.
After stepping right up to her, Kyousuke raised the metal can like a hammer to gather her attention and prepared to attack with his feet from below.
This was checkmate. This snow crystal of an attacker could not avoid his next attack.
Or so he thought.
A moment later, his entire vision rotated vertically.
He had no idea what had happened.
The dull pain in the side of his head told him he had been hit by something powerful enough to flip him around, but it had not come from the attacker's windlass pike.
It had come from someone else. A third party.
(I couldn't even sense their killer intent!?)

Too much about this had been odd, but he did not have time to lament the unfairness of the world. While flipped upside-down, he rapidly regained control of his body and thoughts, pressed one palm against the ground, and regained his balance. He moved away from the attacker he had failed to hit and returned to defenseless Sekurtiti to shield her.
A large man's deep voice reached the boy's ears.
"You're known as the All-Around Armament or 3A, but I guess a Freedom 900 level was too much for you, little girl. Now, come crying to your dandy guardian. Kids have got to have that cute side to them. You're not that White Queen, so no one expects you to be perfect at everything."
When she heard that voice, the tiny assassin puffed out her cheeks while remaining expressionless.
"No. I have yet to be hit by even a single attack. I disagree that I am having any trouble here."
"It'd all be over once that single attack hit you. How about you get that boy over there to explain it to you? The intellectual type loves explaining their plans."
Who was it directing her toward Kyousuke?
When he tried to search through his memories, he started to feel faint. He briefly lost his balance. He very nearly fell to his knees like he had been hit by a hypnotic mental attack.
"Wh-…?"
The man gave off an entirely different impression from when Kyousuke had met him before.
His long blond hair was tied back and his right eye was covered by a black leather eyepatch. His fancy gold-embroidered coat looked unnaturally unsupported in the right sleeve. He was missing an arm.
But the man had an inner core that prevented that flashy appearance from gathering too much focus.
Kyousuke remembered him.
When all his bones had been broken and he had just barely escaped the Queen's Miniature Garden alive, it was this man who had carried him to the transport helicopter. This summoner had given up on his own slim chance at survival and returned to that hellish battlefield to suppress the rampaging White Queen.
"Why are you here? How are you alive!?"
"The name's Claude Magentarain. Come to think of it, did I even introduce myself back then?"
The wild man grinned and toyed with something in his one hand.
It was a dull silver key with a 30-carat diamond in it. Kyousuke clicked his tongue in annoyance, but it was too late. His hoodie pocket had been sharply split open. This man had approached and performed a roundhouse kick to the side of the head before Kyousuke had noticed anything at all, so it would have been easy for him to add in another trick or two.

That was why the tiny assassin had targeted Sekurtiti's yukata sleeve. They were after the pockets before the vitals. That way they could take the key no matter who had it.
(Claude…Claude Magentarain?)
That family name reminded him of that curly, reddish-blond hair. And Azalea had attacked Kyousuke with mass-produced Repliglass weapons made to look just like her. He initially suspected this was a copy made based on Claude's biological data, but he quickly realized that did not add up.
The lost eye and arm would be meaningless. It would confuse Kyousuke further to make him look identical to Kyousuke's memories from the Queen's Miniature Garden. And data on the Queen's Miniature Garden was not easily acquired. The puzzle pieces simply did not fit for Azalea to have calculated it all out.
(Or has Bridesmaid absorbed someone connected to the Miniature Garden? No, that couldn't be. Calm down. You're reading too much into this.)
In that case, had that man really survived?
No, that was not what he needed to focus on now.
(This isn't good. Does Azalea know about this!?)
"Is that girl your current vessel?"
"No, no. She's to replace my missing right arm. Think of us like a three-legged race summoner. My vessel is here."
Claude casually tossed the Diamond Master Key straight up.
Kyousuke suspected that was meant to draw his eyes up so the man could make a surprise attack, but he was wrong. A giant bird of prey cut across overhead and snatched the silver key from the air.
Its wingspan was more than 200 cm.
Kyousuke recalled that Azalea had referred to herself as a bird of prey.
"His name is Ricky and he's probably smarter than me. He might've invited too many Materials inside and triggered a revolution in his mind. All hail the Queen, I guess."
The man spoke of a definite benefit or blessing from the White Queen.
If their main unit learned Kyousuke had set things up at the zoo and that the Diamond Master Key had been stolen from him, he would be at a serious disadvantage. He had to assume his chances of getting Renge and Higan back safely were fast approaching zero. That left one thing to do. And it did not matter if this man was real or not for this.
Claude smiled as he watched the bird of prey fly in a gentle circle above.
"I'm guessing you're not after the 30-carat diamond. Since you're so obsessed with that old junk, are you perhaps after the Natural History's missing entries?"
"!!"
(I have to defeat him before he returns to their main unit with the key or that information!!)

Just using the Incense Grenade clenched in his fist would not be enough. He reached for the Blood-Sign on his back. He did not want to cause too much of a scene, but he had to use the Summoning Ceremony to keep the battle out of the public eye even if only to take out the flying bird of prey and retrieve the key.
Kyousuke's entire body seemed to exude an invisible miasma, but Claude did not seem to care.
Freedom Award 903 could not even maintain control of the conversation.
"I'll praise the speed of your conviction, but you should really observe your surroundings better."
He snapped his fingers.
"Okay, that ends the 2 PM Capybara Knights petting show. Are they all sleepy now that their stomachs are full? The Capybara Knights will be taking a nap now, so please go visit the other animals."
It all drew back.
The many children seemed to be pulled by a powerful force and then they turned around and scattered in every direction.
"The Natural History's missing entries and the Queen's territory beyond that are too much for you to handle. Leave this to a ghost from the past. If I feel like it, I'll give you some of the leftover scraps. …You see, I too have business with *her*."
As he was swallowed up by the ocean of short children, Claude turned his back with 3A who had hidden her weapon in her backpack.
"Wah! …What? There's a pirate here."
"Is he a bad one? A bad pirate would be scary."
Unsurprisingly, his gaudy getup drew the children's attention, but…
"That's right. Haven't you seen Mystery Pirates? I may not look like it, but this dandy gentleman is the legendary pirate who was swallowed up by the mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle."
He followed the current and let the waves of people carry him away.
As they left, the girl known as 3A tried to pull out a small blade within the crowd of children, but Claude lightly kicked her to stop her. He understood that would have the opposite of the desired effect with Kyousuke.
There was nothing Kyousuke could do.
A Summoning Ceremony battle that threatened to destroy the entire zoo was one thing, but he could not think up a way to defeat enemies on that level without causing a scene. No matter what he did now, the surrounding children would be caught in the middle of it. Controlling a Material was like holding the reins of a rampaging horse and releasing it in the desired direction, so they were poorly suited for precision attacks.
"…Dammit!!"
"You did the right thing. There is nothing to be discouraged about."
Sekurtiti spoke kindly to him. "Even if Bridesmaid has the Diamond Master Key, the ancient map remains on my back. We can go through with the exchange."

(That’s not the problem here…)
Kyousuke clenched his teeth and kept his thoughts to himself so as not to worry his partner any further. There were two major problems:
1. Bridesmaid would now learn that Kyousuke had set things up at the zoo. They lost any advantage that would give them.
2. The Offering Team made it clear that Bridesmaid knew that Shiroyama Kyousuke would not allow death no matter how much it hurt his position.
And now the master key had been stolen, leaving him with only the ancient map. He could have threatened to destroy the key to negotiate, but he could not destroy the ancient map.
His only option now was to do what his opponent said.
The situation was about as bad as it could be.
And at that very moment, his smartphone rang.
“Aika, did something happen?”
“Bridesmaid has contacted a secret line to the president of one of Government’s official corporations. Namely, Quad Motors.”
“Curse those underhanded tomb raiders…”
Sekurtiti gnashed her teeth, but Kyousuke needed to focus on Aika. They were at a disadvantage, but refusing to speak would not improve their situation.
“The world’s largest defense contractor is doing everything it can, but the connection is somehow entirely untraceable. They’ve relayed it on to us. I can only guess, but this has to be Azalea Magentarain. Onii-chan, are you ready?”
The world seemed to grow dark, but he could not give in to that.
He immediately refocused his thoughts and put together the best performance he could muster. He focused on the noises around him and checked for any noticeable animal cries or zoo announcements.
“I’m ready at any time.”
The situation was a mess, but he began a negotiation with lives on the line.
As part of the Tanabata Fair, the hold music was a nursery rhyme about the stars. Just when the song started to loop, it ended and he was connected to the other end.
“Hi, Azalea. Are you planning to visit home?”
“If the Quad Motors HQ in the States isn’t enough, you’ll have to get every other agency you can find to work at tracing this call. Still, I meant this as a show of good faith so you wouldn’t waste your time with a lot of pointless effort.”
He did not need to take any of that at face value.
Azalea had not directly called Aika or Kyousuke simply because she had not known their numbers, but that would not be the only reason she had used her old home of Quad Motors as a relay point. That choice may have been made for very personal reasons, but it was still important information for Kyousuke.

For one thing, he still did not know why her soul had been swallowed up by the White Queen during the previous incident. And what had happened after she was captured and sent to the Colorful Museum? The foundation of it all might be found at Quad Motors or the Magentarain family that ran it. It was also possible that the dubious man named Claude Magentarain was deeply involved.
“What happened, Azalea?”
“I could ask you the very same question, but do you think you could easily sum up the full history of what made you who you are?” The worshiper girl giggled. “Let’s not even attempt the impossible here. For now, I’d like to tell you the time of our party.”
Kyousuke did not even allow himself to breathe in the air that smelled of straw and animals.
The zoo was off the table now and the Diamond Master Key had been stolen. That only left the ancient map that could not be destroyed since it was on Sekurtiti’s back. And he would have to begin the negotiations at an irregular location with no time to prepare.
Or so he thought.
Except…
“Please visit the designated location at the designated time and make sure to bring the Diamond Master Key and the ancient map with you. The time will be 1 AM tomorrow morning and the place will be Toy Dream 35’s Z Block. I will contact you later with further instructions.”
“…?”
Confusion filled his mind.
She was falling for his trap. It was all going as planned. But it should have been diverging from the plan after something so out of the ordinary had occurred. Why did she not mention the loss of the master key? Why would she designate a location where he had been seen? She should have given up on the entire block and moved to another location. He briefly wondered if he was being tested or if he was speaking with a recording.
Had Azalea still not received a report from Claude?
…Or was Azalea entirely unaware of Claude’s actions – or presence – here?
“Are Renge and Higan still alive? Do you have a way of proving that?”
Various pieces of information and possibilities exploded in his mind, but he could not let Azalea notice. He kept his mouth moving and attempted to keep the conversation underway.
“And here I thought I was showing a sign of friendship by not asking you to prove you had not destroyed the master key or killed the ancient map girl.”
“I know it would be hard to get them to speak after losing in the Summoning Ceremony, so show me a video of them. I’ll be able to tell if it’s just a recording. And if you can’t earn my trust, the deal is off.”
“Hee hee. You would never do that. You want the Founder’s Gallery as much as we do.”

“At the very least, I have the ancient map. I can find another way to decode it. It might take a lengthy detour, though.”
“None of us would be going to all this trouble if we could do that. The key and chest would be meaningless.”
“To a normal person maybe. But do you really think I fall into that category?”
“Alice (with) Rabbit will not allow anyone to die.”
“Is that so? Then what kind of retribution would you like? If I wanted, I could give Sekurtiti general anesthesia and flay the ancient map from her. I won’t hesitate when it isn’t about an actual life. Don’t forget that.”
“…”
“…”
Sekurtiti’s pale blue eyes were giving him a look. She clearly wanted to know why he was provoking Azalea when things were going unexpectedly well. But that was not how to look at this. When things were going too smoothly, he had to be skeptical. He still did not have a full grasp of what it was, but something was not right here. And that could become a slight starting point that he could not afford to let Azalea know about.
The ominous animal smell grew stronger than the straw smell.
“Fine then,” said Azalea. “I hope you see this as a sign of my desire to complete this exchange peacefully. Please switch the call to visual mode.”
Kyousuke was not an idiot, so he only did so after crushing the smartphone’s lens with his finger. He could not let her know he was at the zoo. There was a chance she could analyze the background noise to determine his location, but this was better than nothing.
And then the view from Azalea’s device filled the smartphone screen.
Sekurtiti peered at it from the side.
He could not tell where it was. He saw some kind of black curtain and could hear machines running. And that background was mostly obscured by a close up of Azalea’s face. She was probably holding the smartphone in her hand. The distance was a little odd. She was holding it from a somewhat elevated angle, so he could see the bright skin at her yukata’s open chest.
“How cautious of you. But fine. I’ll view that as proof that you’re taking this seriously.”
The smartphone pointed away from Azalea.
“!?”
Sekurtiti covered her mouth with her hands. She seemed to be suppressing a scream.
The screen showed a large doll seated against the wall.
No, it was a black-haired girl in a shrine maiden outfit. The chest of her clothes was removed and the soft skin hidden below was opened wide. The skin, muscles, ribs, and everything inside were clearly manmade. The artificial organs looked like leather bags stitched into shape and they pulsed with the same accuracy as a human’s.

“Even I was shocked by this. I managed to retrieve the Joruri Texts of the former Meinokawa Shrine… I had heard they were originally trying to create a fully artificial vessel, but I never thought they would have created a summoner too. And this is more than just a theory; they’ve actually made one… Peh heh heh. They could create a truly unmanned and mass-produced unit like this!”
“Azalea…”
“Oh, don’t you worry. Everything that was removed for examination will be back inside her by the time of the exchange. Yes, with nothing missing.”
“Azalea!!”
The curly-haired girl giggled.
“I told you before that Repliglass is the remnants of a failed attempt to create a likeness of Her Majesty, didn’t I? This will allow me to make up for its deficiencies and then some. Of course, even this is incomplete, but if I incorporate the Joruri Texts into Repliglass, I might just be able to resurrect that lost dream. …Yes, I might just create a vessel with greater accuracy and strength than a human. Then Her Majesty can remain in this world indefinitely.”
The conversation turned in *her* direction.
No matter where he went, all calamity and mayhem seemed to fall toward that white evil as if there was a powerful pull in that direction.
“That said, the Founder’s Gallery is still necessary. Even if I fully absorb the Joruri Texts, that plan will be a long way from completion. Including the Natural History’s missing entries in the doll and fusing the new techniques with the old would be the best way of indefinitely fixing Her Majesty’s soul in this desolate world.”
“…”
“I mean, I lack the necessary parts as things are. Although that might change if you gave me permission to dig out the spine of a vessel as excellent as Meinokawa Higan.”
This was no longer just a cruel game.
If she was only toying with the twins’ lives to make Kyousuke suffer, there was still something he could do. Simply put, he only had to give her something else with which to torment him. But not even that would work anymore. Bridesmaid had found definite value in Renge and Higan.
They would never let go of those shrine maiden twins.
This was about more than just defeating Kyousuke. If the twins were now an offering to the Queen, he doubted Bridesmaid would let them slip away so easily. They would want to hold onto Renge’s artificial organs and Higan’s spine, just in case the Natural History’s missing entries were not found in the Founder’s Gallery or were a disappointment.
“You wanted proof they were alive, didn’t you? Satisfied?”
“Yes.” Kyousuke briefly forgot to keep up his act and responded in a deep and icy voice. “Now I have no reason to hold back. None whatsoever.”

Part 11

It was late at night and the Milky Way shined with a cold light overhead. After sending Shiroyama Kyousuke the location at the very last second, the Bridesmaid group led by Azalea and The Saint hid in the darkness as they entered the metropolitan zoo. It was half past midnight, which was half an hour before the exchange began. That might seem like cutting it close, but this was the right answer. The location of an exchange like this was not the same as a hideout. They wanted to depart while leaving as little a trace of themselves as possible, so they wanted to avoid staying too long and thus leaving too much evidence in the form of hairs, saliva, sweat, footprints, etc.
The zoo was already closed and the staff had left the darkness, but there were a few night nightshift workers who stayed throughout the night. Animals lived at the zoo, so they could not eliminate the possibility of a sudden health emergency.
That said, the number of nightshift workers was woefully few for such a large zoo.
Plus, Bridesmaid had been prepared to swiftly “eliminate” any such uncertain factors the moment they entered the zoo.
But the members searching the large zoo gave the following report:
“The nightshift vet and zookeeper are nowhere to be found. We found some warm coffee and an open packet of crackers in the administrative office, so it looks like they were here not long ago.”
“That is fine. …No matter what might happen, he is still Alice (with) Rabbit. And catching them off guard would have been the easiest way to not leave a trace.” Azalea giggled as she answered. “Did he realize he couldn’t change anything once we arrived? Even if we tried to cancel the deal and leave now, he is sure to pursue us and insist we follow through. We will settle this here. Our top priority is the Diamond Master Key and the ancient map. If we obtain the Natural History’s missing entries, we will be able to invite Her Majesty’s soul into this world. It is a bit early, but it seems Shiroyama Kyousuke has already arrived. …Let’s begin once everyone is in place.”
After a quick look from his small master, the elderly butler gently indicated the duffel bag and suitcase he held under his arms. They were ready to go.
Azalea calmly smiled and pulled a smartphone from the collar of her lacy and frilly yukata.

Kyousuke’s smartphone vibrated from an incoming call.
He would have to activate the backlight in this dark space that smelled of straw and animals, but there was no use worrying about that now.

The game had begun.
“How do you do?”
“It’s 10 minutes until the time you set, so are you starting already?”
“You’re sick of waiting too, aren’t you? Come to the lion cage on Layer 3. And keep this call active.”
“Sorry, but the battery’s about to die.”
“I had a feeling you would say that.”
Kyousuke hung up and spoke to Sekurtiti.
“Just to be clear, there is no going back once this begins.”
“Why say that now after everything you’ve gotten me involved in? Besides, you cannot clear the very first barrier without the ancient map on my back.”
“…”
That was an important bargaining chip for Kyousuke and Bridesmaid. It was a crucial piece of the puzzle.
Or it should have been.
Even after the normal guests had left, the animals had returned to their beds in the stables, and everyone but the nightshift workers had gone home, Kyousuke and Sekurtiti had remained hidden in the zoo, giving them plenty of time to think. But they had found no way of eliminating the uncertain factors of this deal: Claude Magentarain and 3A.
That man had taken the Diamond Master Key, but would that prove to be a good thing or a bad thing?
(I was worried they would change the deal at the last second, but we’re still at the zoo. What do they gain from this? But we have to do this regardless.)
Needless to say, Kyousuke’s goal was to get everyone back safely. He had to rescue Renge and Higan, but he could not let Bridesmaid capture Sekurtiti in exchange.
“Let’s get started.”
“Yes.”
The Milky Way filling the sky overhead seemed coldly indifferent. The closed zoo had no lights on in order to help with the Tanabata astronomical observation fair. Plus, this place prioritized the lifestyles of the animals over the humans. Even if the animals were back in their stables, it would be strange to have bright lights on at night.
As they walked through the zoo and its powerful scent of animals and the night, Sekurtiti turned her head every which way.
She heard a rustling sound, but when she looked over at the bush there, she only found a stray cat that had boldly snuck into the zoo.
“Don’t worry. There are no snipers around here.”
“No, it isn’t that. This is something of a habit of mine.”
“?”
“The desert might make you think of a sweltering midsummer sun, but the true terror is found in the frigid desert nights that drop below freezing. And most carnivores are nocturnal. My senses seem to grow sharper when I smell an animal at night.”

Kyousuke and Sekurtiti followed the spiraling path below the carpet of stars that was unnaturally vast for a big city.
“Sorry,” muttered Kyousuke.
The brown girl did not seem to understand.
“What do you mean?”
“Sorry I got you involved in all this. This is almost entirely my own personal fight. It isn’t even meant to fulfill a client’s order. Part of me is only viewing you as a weapon.”
Sekurtiti’s primary request had ended when they had protected the tomb keepers at the apartment. Rescuing Renge and Higan only came from the obligation she felt toward the summoner who had worked to fight the tomb raiders. Even assisting from a position of safety would be out of the ordinary now, so it would be hard to find any reason for her to act as a bargaining chip in a hostage exchange where he was at such a disadvantage.
But that ruler did not hesitate to answer.
“I do not mind. You may indeed have saved a great many people, but that does not mean that no one can want to save you in the same way. And I am actually grateful that I have found someone who will worry about me on that level.”
“…”
“The tomb keepers are all aware they are servants and they do not hesitate to offer up their very lives for me. So their service is partially fixed in place and they risk their lives like they’re running digital equivalent exchange calculations: This threat is worth this life, or the numbers check out if the danger rises above this point. …Their lives are always handled like that, so I rarely have a chance to contact human emotion that cannot be replaced with numbers and equations. The intense emotion in your heart is a luxury to me.”
“Is that how it works? A part of me does sometimes think about ‘graduating’ or ‘retiring’. I start to think everything I’m doing is just for my own selfish reasons and that all my struggling is only widening the world’s wounds.”
“Selfishness is nothing to look down on. For example, my parents risked their lives to protect the pharaoh’s slumber. They fought Seth, a traitor who leaked information on the burial treasures to an outside band of tomb raiders. My parents lost their lives, so I was given the title of Tomb Priestess at a very young age as a way to strike back.” In her golden tiara, Sekurtiti looked up at the Milky Way. “Seth was actually a faithful servant and his treachery was only an act meant to place me on the throne so young. We are a group that can and does do such things. My parents had passed their prime and were beginning to decline. If they had refused to hand over control and had clung to the throne, if honest Seth had refused to sully his name, or if anyone had been even slightly selfish or greedy, this never would have happened. We would have been too pure and we never could have rid ourselves of the digital pre-established harmony.”
“…”

“If the president of Toy Dream had not suggested I look at everything from a different angle when he assisted in restoring the wall art, I never would have noticed this truth and I would have become nothing more than a producer of good deeds. So I must be thankful for everything that has happened as I protect the pharaoh’s slumber and fight the tomb raiders. I am so very thankful to my parents who gave up the throne, to Seth who took on the villain’s role, and to President Toydream who built this city. I do not want to repay them with an answer found through digital calculations. I want to learn of more intense emotions. I want the power you have to bend the world around you with a single feeling. I want the kindness you have to distort what is right using your selfishness.”
“Kindness, hm?”
“Am I wrong?”
Kyousuke did not respond.
He intentionally changed the subject.
“I see. You said wherever the pharaoh slept was sacred ground, but I didn’t realize you had such an attachment to this city.”
“If I didn’t, I never would have allowed the pharaoh’s remains to be transported from the pyramid. The president has a very observant eye and excellent analytic ability and he can tell which truths should be divulged and which should not. If he kept this gallery a secret, he must have had a good reason for it. It might be an important document for the Summoning Ceremony and it might be the Phantom Girl book he worked on for years but never had a chance to release. Shiroyama Kyousuke, I said I appreciated your intense emotion and I have decided it might just be enough to break through the president’s reason for keeping this hidden. I want to locate the gallery and protect the treasure within before those lowly tomb raiders can break through the stone door. Just as that president’s discerning eye broke through millennia of tradition, and just as we carried the pharaoh from the pyramid to protect his slumber.”
They arrived at the lion’s cage.
It was a large circular field. It was surrounded by a concrete wall several meters tall and it was situated lower than the surrounding area. Straw was laid out for a napping area and tires were lying around as toys. Most of the visitors would probably lean over the railing to peer below, but that open space looked like a giant gaping maw at the moment.
Kyousuke’s smartphone vibrated.
He pulled it from his pocket, but this meant their enemy knew where they were. He saw the faint light of a phone’s backlight on the opposite side of the circular cage.
It was Azalea Magentarain.
Kyousuke glared at her as he answered the call and her statement was short.
“Pull out your Blood-Sign and Incense Grenades and get rid of them. I will measure your sincerity based on how far you throw them.”

“…”
He obediently did as she asked. He pulled the Repliglass Blood-Sign from the back of his hoodie and threw it to the side. Then he pulled an Incense Grenade from the pocket, dropped it to his feet, and kicked it down toward the tire toys.
“There is an unnatural weight in your hood. Should I interpret that as insincerity?”
“You’re watching carefully.”
He removed the Incense Grenade hidden in his hood and threw it aside. He was now unarmed.
As he had said before, the game had already begun. Nothing his opponent told him to do was going to help him. He would be surprised if they were not being targeted by multiple snipers with night vision goggles.
He was truly unarmed as a summoner.
He had already predicted this, but he would be lying if he said he was not nervous.
After all, his life was not the only one at risk here.
“Climb down. Inside.”
Climbing into the lion cage sounded quite dangerous, but he might as well not have shown up if he was going to quibble over something like that.
“Hyah.”
Sekurtiti shrieked when he picked her up and hopped over the railing. It was a drop of several meters, but he bent his knees to soften the impact.
A girl and a man jumped down on the opposite side: Azalea Magentarain and Fractal Leskins.
The rose thorn patterned yukata caught the air and fluttered around her, so the faint light of their smartphones revealed the brilliant white of her chest and thighs.
“Now, then.”
The summoners ended the call, put away their phones, and began speaking directly.
The elderly butler lowered a suitcase and duffel bag to the concrete ground while the young girl with long curly hair arrogantly tapped her long boots on the ground, smiled thinly, and licked her lips with her small tongue.
“What you want is right here.”
“I’d like to open the bags to make sure.”
“If you want, but keep in mind this is a lion cage.”
Kyousuke heard a heavy metal door opening behind him. Sekurtiti looked back in shock. The sound of sharp claws clicking on the concrete ground arrived at irregular intervals. The lingering scent of straw and animals was washed away by something much stronger. What was this cage for? Its residents had gone back into the stable, but they almost sounded irritated that their normal schedule had been disturbed. Or perhaps stepping on the napping straw counted as violating the king of beasts’ territory.

“We hold the reins of otherworldly Materials on a daily basis, so those mere beasts will never get the better of us. They shouldn’t even be able to approach.”
Azalea should have been in the lethal zone as well, but she did not seem to mind at all. She maintained her confident smile.
“But in their current state, those girls lack that ‘pressure’. In fact, could 300-level amateurs like them do it at all? Regardless, you should assume they will be helplessly devoured while they ceaselessly repeat the same action.”
If what Azalea had said was accurate, then they saw Renge and Higan as a prize.
But that was why she did not just hold a gun to their heads. It was difficult to imagine the pain of a gun. She could easily foolishly trap herself in a situation where Kyousuke made a reckless attack and she was forced to pull the trigger even though she did not want to.
So she had gone for something more inefficient.
Being eaten by a ferocious beast was the primal fear of being unilaterally tormented by a lower but more powerful creature. That would prevent Kyousuke from doing anything rash.
The elderly butler moved his hands and the twin shrine maidens rolled out almost too easily.
They were still being affected by their loss, so they slowly repeated the same action while lying on their sides and had no issue with rubbing their cheeks against the floor of a cage that reeked of animals.
“Now, hand over the Diamond Master Key and ancient map. You can resist if you like, but while we clash, those two will be torn to pieces and killed. Plus, I doubt you can oppose us without a Blood-Sign and Incense Grenade.”
It all came down to this.
All of these lives relied on Kyousuke’s choice here.
The first thing he had to consider was whether Azalea was making a serious deal or if it was all a farce. In other words, did she or did she not know that he no longer had the Diamond Master Key? He could always bluff that he did have it, but she would see right through it if she was connected to Claude. If she saw that as a sign of his insincerity, she could start in a lethal direction. But he was also reluctant to bring up Claude’s name here. In the off chance that Azalea was unaware, that could mean revealing his trump card prematurely.
So he took a step forward on the straw and spoke.
“If I hand over both at once, you might just leave without giving me anything. So I’ll trade for Renge and Higan one at a time.”
“Oh? You’re giving me the choice? Then I can I have the ancient map first? And here I thought you would put human life first.”
Kyousuke glanced over.
Sekurtiti gave him a small nod back and took a step forward. Needless to say, this was all over if she was taken too. But he could not keep her with

him forever. None of Azalea's instructions were going to help him, so Sekurtiti would be taken away eventually even if he tried to keep her around.
"Start with Renge."
"Hee hee. So you have a favorite twin."
Azalea probably thought she could kill him with the Summoning Ceremony at any time, so she had no preference there. She crouched down, waved her finger in front of the sacrifice's face, and slowly pointed over at Kyousuke. Renge began slowly crawling over on all fours.
Sekurtiti walked forward in her gold tiara.
Kyousuke crouched down to hold the black-haired shrine maiden who had been stripped of all pride, dignity, and even human behavior. She had once self-deprecatingly said she was manmade, but she had the same warmth, pulse, and flowing blood as a human. He had failed to protect her when Bridesmaid had gotten ahead of him, but she was still hanging on by a thread and he could not allow that to be cut.
After receiving the brown girl in a yukata, Azalea left the ancient map with her elderly butler and made an announcement.
"Now, the Diamond Master Key. I know that leaving with just one of the two isn't what you really want."
This was the true black box.
Did she know the truth about the key?
The answer to that question was a devastating bomb hidden in this deal.
He had given it a lot of thought.
And he still did not know the truth as he held slowly-moving Renge and gave his answer.
"What I really want? You want to know what I really want???"
"…"
"Then I'll tell you. My plan is to rescue both Renge and Higan. And I can't lose Sekurtiti while doing so either. I'll rescue everyone while also stealing away the Golden Treasure Chest you have. Then I'll walk unharmed into the Founder's Gallery and acquire the Natural History's missing entries without anyone interfering. And there is no room for Bridesmaid in my plans. I need all of you to disappear."
"It sounds like I need you to suffer some more."
Azalea reached into the collar of her modified yukata that revealed both her cleavage and shoulders. She was probably reaching for the ribbon Blood-Sign wrapped around a reel and for her own Incense Grenade. Kyousuke could not do anything to the White Thorns without a Blood-Sign of his own, so the Artificial Sacred Ground would mean his death.
"We will never attempt to judge what Her Majesty is thinking. Shiroyama Kyousuke, no matter what shape you might take and whether you are alive or dead, Bridesmaid will prioritize *offering you to Her Majesty once she has been invited to this world.* I can search your corpse for the key. And if it is not there, I can go ask someone else who would know."

“The thing is…”
Kyousuke ignored her and continued speaking.
Was it an expression of her unease over the calamity befalling her or was it an expression of kindness? Sekurtiti held the blonde shrine maiden in her arms.
“Securing Meinokawa Renge in advance was the first and last barrier for me. After all, you had opened her up. Retrieving her is fine and all, but this would have been troublesome if she was missing some organs or you had stuck a bomb inside her. So it was important that I actually had her in my hands to confirm she was just fine. I especially needed to check her breathing and pulse.”
“…?”
“And Sekurtiti’s location honestly doesn’t matter. After all…”
Kyousuke kicked away the napping straw at his feet.
And he revealed what was hidden below.
“If I detonate an Incense Grenade like this, the summoner and vessel are carried to the same spot.”
It was too late by the time Azalea and Fractal tried to act.
The brown girl they held was pulled back to Kyousuke by a dreadful force.
Along with Meinokawa Higan in her arms.
Renge, Higan, and Sekurtiti.
They were all back with him. Shiroyama Kyousuke no longer had to hold back. He kicked up the Blood-Sign that had been hidden below the straw along with the Incense Grenade and he caught it in one hand.
Azalea and Fractal were already trapped in a cubic cage.
A ribbon spiraled through empty air to form a Blood-Sign and the large flower decoration on the back of Azalea’s hips shook as she spoke in a low voice.
“You knew I would confiscate your equipment, so you hid a set here in advance? But you couldn’t have known I would instruct you to climb into the lion cage.”
“No. That’s why I hid them all over the zoo. Just like a stage magician does with playing cards. No matter what card you drew, I had a full set of 52 cards hidden here and there on the stage. So I could claim I had predicted what card you would choose.”
“But how? You didn’t have enough time for such a detailed setup after I told you the location…”
“Yes, I wonder how I managed that.”
This had been a gamble on Kyousuke’s part.
But now that he had the hostages back safe, he could guess that Claude had not reported back to Azalea.
“Then I shall use your weakness against you. Offering Team, prepare yourselves.”
If those girls given suicidal desires were here, Kyousuke would have to go rescue them.

But that was not a problem for him.
It sounded like gas was escaping all around them. And that was probably accurate. A look up at the railing above the lion cage showed the growing girls who should have been committing suicide were doing nothing at all.
“I didn’t just hide Blood-Signs and Incense Grenades. The original incenses were a mixture of plants and minerals that would put people in a trance. Lu-san really ripped me off, but mixing up a downer incense that knocks people out is quite easy.”
Azalea tapped her long boots on the ground and gave her butler a look, so he showed her a wristwatch that was likely worth a fortune on its own. It was 1 AM, the original starting time.
“…Not bad.”
“I could say the same about you.”
Without the Summoning Ceremony, they all would have fainted. And Kyousuke did not care if Renge and Higan were taken out too. As long as he could bring them back alive.
And in the end, it was a simple thing.
Whoever won the Summoning Ceremony would obtain everything.
“Sekurtiti.”
“Fractal.”
The summoners simultaneously called out to their vessel and raised their Blood-Sign.
The three-dimensional Rose made from 6 x 6 x 6 = 216 Petals appeared between them. To take everything from the other, they both chose one of their initial 3 White Thorns and struck it with the tip of their Blood-Sign.
The powerful impact from both sides shattered the Rose and the countless Petals scattered around the area.
But Azalea seemed more focused on the light in Shiroyama Kyousuke’s eyes than on the Petals or White Thorns. Almost like an invisible flame was burning her neck and forcing her to move.
And the hunter spoke.
“It’s time you paid for treating those two like tools.”
It had finally begun.
The summoners fought using those that lurked beyond the gods of legend.

Part 12

“Un.”
Azalea’s adorable and yet alluring lips smiled.

They looked like a flower bud.
“Deux.”
At the same time, the White Thorn that should have hit a Petal instead hit the wall of the Artificial Sacred Ground. This was not random. After ricocheting a few times, it accurately returned to her.
“Trois.”
She spun and once more hit the White Thorn before it disappeared. This high-speed loop was Azalea Magentarain’s pattern for assured victory. When a White Thorn was used, it was supposed to take 10 seconds to be replenished, but she overturned that and continued hitting Petals in with the force of a Gatling gun to build up a Material of overwhelming Cost without giving her opponent a chance to fight back. This attack was a nightmare to her opponents and it had brought her up to Government Award 930.
But Kyousuke had broken through this overwhelming barrage once before. The Artificial Sacred Ground was a 20 meter cube at first, but it expanded and contracted to match the size of the summoned Materials. He could use that to change the size of the Artificial Sacred Ground’s walls she was trying to use and thus break her accurate loop.
Kyousuke had the Original Red (b). Cost: 1. Sound Range: Low.
Azalea had the Original Green (k). Cost: 1. Sound Range: Middle.
(Use my body as much as you want. I have no reason to let these lowly tomb raiders get away. Especially when they are so blinded by the glitter of treasure that they take hostages!!)
The voice from his contracted vessel scorched the back of Kyousuke’s mind. It all began there and he knew the weakness of Azalea’s wild rush, but he could not fully break down her strategy. No matter how much he obstructed her, Azalea’s loop would close once more.
She had updated her weakness after her previous loss.
She had honed her skill to the point that she could accurately respond when the moving walls of the Artificial Sacred Ground grew or shrank.
Kyousuke had the Floating Blood-Craving Hammer (zn – bih – ei – xa – qux – hdi)
Cost: 15. Sound Range: Low. Just the head of the giant hammer was taller than Kyousuke. The head was a black and shiny stone, but the lovely girl’s form visible inside it made it look like a tranquil coffin.
Azalea had the Witch Trapped in a Bewitching Flower who Spreads a Sweetly Putrid Stench (su – j – ou – ve – bo – xm – wg – ei – ig – ta – ux).
Cost: 21. Sound Range: High. Just the upper body of an alluring and evil woman stuck out from the center of a giant flower with countless thick vines wriggling around it. Each time she twisted her body, a sweet smell lured in the enemy with a powerful attraction. Once the enemy was within the lethal range, the cruel monster’s vine spears would pierce their body and drain them of their nutrients.

Kyousuke had the superior Sound Range, but once the Cost difference reached 10, she would be able to force her way past that and wear down the Silhouette at the core of his Material. He of course had to solve this before that happened.
And…
(Kh. This is hard enough on its own, but I have to protect the two hostages at the same time…!?)
Sekurtiti's thoughts flowed into Kyousuke's mind as his contracted vessel. Renge and Higan were also inside the Artificial Sacred Ground. They could not let Azalea's Material hit those two and they could not let their own Material's rampage hit them either.
The lion cage was just not a good place to be.
So Kyousuke did not hesitate to shout an order.
"Destroy our footing, Sekurtiti!!"
(You want to open a pitfall below the lowly tomb raiders to send them into the abyss, don't you!? I understand completely!)
The ground was concrete, but a swing of the hammer smashed the world around them. Kyousuke and Azalea both fell down along with the stage itself. Renge and Higan could not brace themselves for impact, so he reached out his Blood-Sign, caught them, and lowered them to the floor.
They were now inside a large space with a temperature of -10 degrees.
(It's cold? What is this? It reminds me of the desert night.)
Azalea's long boots sounded on the ground as she landed in the nearly freezing space. Due to her struggling, her rose thorn pattern yukata was coming off in places, but her expression remained unchanged since she was safe inside her protective circle. No, even if she had not been, a summoner would leave behind such trivial worldly matters when focused.
Kyousuke and Sekurtiti had entered this off limits area back when they made their preparations. This was a meat storage room for the carnivores' food. Aika's white liger ate several dozen kilograms of meat a day, so a very large cold storage facility was needed to serve a zoo of this size. Zoos were on the front line of animal welfare, but they also had to allow some lives to be consumed to preserve the lives of their own ferocious beasts.
Frozen meat was savagely exposed while stored along steel racks and in containers. The overall location felt like a library or document archive built for giants. The steel racks were stacked as high as a 3-story building, so they could be knocked over, pulled out, or used in any number of ways.
But even with so much of her bright white shoulders, chest, and thighs exposed to the subzero temperatures, Azalea calmly adjusted her grip on her Blood-Sign.
"Such a boring location. Did you think you could stop my Gatling gun with this?"
"There's only one way to find out."
Their fierce attacks resumed.

He could not suppress Azalea by growing and shrinking the Artificial Sacred Ground like before. She could make more attacks than him, so the Cost difference between Materials would only continue to grow. Certain defeat awaited him at this rate. He knew that, but there was nothing Kyousuke could do. There was no way he could manipulate the White Thorns to catch up to Azalea's speed.
He knew that of course.
And he also knew failure here meant losing everything.
"?"
But as Azalea repeated loops as accurate as clockwork, her eyebrows shot up in doubt. Kyousuke's Blood-Sign had clearly done something other than control the White Thorns. He sharply jabbed it toward something baffling: a faucet.
That faucet was made to produce water in the subzero cold storage room.
"Wha-?"
Perfectly normal tap water erupted from the faucet. The jab from the Blood-Sign sent it flying through the air like a water gun and it collided with a nearby steel rack. Before gravity could pull it down, it froze right where it landed.
"Cold storage rooms often have heated water pipes prepared in case the products freeze to the floor or wall. But it's only an emergency measure, so it can actually freeze things on even harder if you let it."
Irregular obstacles were built up all around the area.
And those obstructed Azalea Magentarain's White Thorns. No, in that case, she would only have to recollect her randomly scattered Thorns. But Kyousuke's attack went beyond that. He changed the direction of the water torrent according to his calculations in order to capture, swallow up, and stop Azalea's Thorns.
There was nothing she could do then.
The stopped White Thorns quickly vanished into oblivion. She had set up her rapid loop Gatling gun to fire infinitely without using up her stock of White Thorns, but this water cannon made short work of that.
"Summoning Ceremony battles usually rely on the paranormal elements of the White Thorns, the Petals, the Artificial Sacred Ground's walls, and the Spots, but that isn't all there is."
Now that the barrage had ended, Kyousuke started to catch up.
The Cost difference vanished.
"At times, life and death is determined by an entirely ordinary science experiment that even an elementary schooler could understand. All we're doing is placing divine models on a stage created from the normal, everyday world."
"…"
Azalea was dumbfounded as she stared at the ever-changing stage.
Just 5 minutes earlier, she had been an absolute queen. She had taken hostages, she had bound her opponent's actions, and she had even held his

life in her hands. She had taken away his Blood-Sign and Incense Grenades, she had surrounded him with a group, and even if he had fought back, she could have immediately and unilaterally crushed him with the Summoning Ceremony while remaining entirely safe herself.
But it was all gone now.
Her plans had fallen apart and she had nothing with which to get back on her feet.
“I…”
Azalea did not let up even now, but her Gatling gun revealed its fragility now that it was trapped by the concept of ammo. It was just like how actual machineguns were sometimes hated on the battlefield for using up ammunition too quickly and thus were modified on the scene to lower their rate of rotation. Azalea’s impressive rotation rate worked against her now and she only used up her White Thorns too quickly. She was strangling herself like this.
“But I must approach Her Majesty all the same. I am not worthy of this life that I received from Claude. So I must repay him! I must accomplish something glorious enough to make him glad he gave that life to me!!”
“I met him.”
Kyousuke kept his comment brief.
And he thought for a moment when he saw her eyes widen in surprise. Which meeting should he tell her about? He ultimately chose the Claude Magentarain he had met long ago.
“I had pulled the trigger and no one would have blamed him for killing me right there, but he still picked me up and ran across that nightmarish battlefield. He placed only me on a helicopter that could have been shot down at any time and he casually returned to that hell. And do you know what Claude Magentarain said to me then?”
“What?”
“You worked hard. That White Queen is enough to make a group of grown men shake in their boots, but you kept challenging her until your tiny body was this beaten up. So, boy, that effort gives you that much more of a right to seek happiness. If it didn’t, this world wouldn’t be worth fighting for.”
“Ah.”
“He was completely misguided and a great sinner like me had no right to hear those words, but I still remember them. I don’t know about now, but the Claude Magentarain from back then definitely said that with a tremor in his voice. He did not view the White Queen as divine! You’re free to walk the path of a worshiper if you want, Azalea, but that path will never lead to an accomplishment that would satisfy the Claude at your starting point!!”
Kyousuke’s White Thorn bounced around the cold storage room in a flash and knocked several Petals into Spots.
The Material based around Sekurtiti twisted around and changed form. Divine-class. Cost: 11. Sound Range: High. It was a beautiful half-naked woman who was adorned with countless feathers that left most of her

brown skin exposed. The Aztecs knew her as an impure sexual demon of beauty and love, but also as a goddess who absorbed the malice and hatred from human souls and carried it in their stead. She changed from a young girl to an old woman with the waxing and waning of the moon, she devoured human sin, and she stood on the front line as a god of war. This many-faced goddess was said to be the death brought by lust and the mother of all things. Now, she made an appearance to take on the impurities of the lost child named Azalea Magentarain.
But it was no use.
Azalea Magentarain could not escape the White Queen now.
After all, she had lost much while walking that path.
She was an illegitimate child of the Magentarain family. She was the seed of disaster created by sharing the legitimate bloodline with a common woman. She had been taken away – kidnapped really – wearing nothing but old rags and she had thought she would be literally torn to pieces by her father's jealous wife, but then that man with such large hands had saved her. He had also been a likely candidate to inherit the Magentarain Family, but he had saved that rag-wearing girl and been driven from the family. Azalea had never forgotten that summoner.
The Magentarain bloodline meant nothing to her.
She had been told to live a life she could be proud of in the name of Azalea, so she had done so. As if pursuing his vanished back, she had desperately searched for a way to make up for his disappearance. She had searched all over the world and found nothing. She had walked around until her feet were blistered and raw, she had checked every nook and cranny, and she had finally found it.
The White Queen.
The strongest, greatest, and ultimate accomplishment.
If she had that, wouldn't her savior's disappearance have been meaningful after all?
That had been the thought in her mind all this time.
So…
And yet…
"Please do not…take this from me."
No matter how much she struggled, her Material was still in the Regulation-class.
She could no longer defeat Kyousuke who had reached the Divine-class.
"Please do not take this desire from me!!"
"Don't be stupid. You need to face your past. Who did you start all of this for? Look back to your starting point and redo it all from there! Assuming, that is, you can even come back from what you've done!!"
How could she?
How could she come back?

After living this long and after being saved on a whim by that smiling man, Azalea Magentarain’s life had left the rails and her world had veered off course. So how could she come back?
She could not win.
Even so, she clenched her teeth and tightened her grip on the Blood-Sign.
Come with me, she willed.
Fractal Leskins, her vessel, had transformed into an otherworldly Material. He was her partner who had pursued that man with her and also arrived at the White Queen.
(That is fine by me.)
A voice replied in the back of her mind.

(If that is what you want, then it is sure to get through to Master Claude who let you live. So follow your own will as far as it will take you. The duty I have been given is to help you down that path.)
Those were words that would change meaning like a kaleidoscope depending on who heard them.
Someone with a brutal heart might let loose and rampage around. Someone with very little responsibility might place their sins on the shoulders of someone who was not even present and then flee.
“No…fair…”
But Azalea was different.
With the sound of rustling cloth, her wrapped ribbon Blood-Sign began to unravel from the tip.
“That would mean my evil deeds are dirtying his hands…”
As soon as she accepted that, her innermost core broke.
It happened once she viewed her life in pursuit of the White Queen as “evil deeds”.
The world was kind.
Even after coming this far, she was given a chance to “go back”.
And it all ended with a single attack.
A beam of what looked like concentrated moonlight swept across everything and Alice (with) Rabbit blew away his enemy.

Part 13

The battle was over.
Once the Artificial Sacred Ground and protective circle vanished, the icy chill assaulted Kyousuke’s entire body. He was worried about Renge and Higan and he could not ignore Azalea and Fractal now that they had lost. When the temperature was this low, there was a risk of their skin sticking to the floor or wall, so he could not leave them lying around for too long.
“Sekurtiti. Sorry, but can you help out?”
“Understood. I will carry the shrine maidens. I would prefer not to touch the tomb raiders.”
The butler named Fractal was a large man, but since Azalea was so tiny, either pair seemed about the same weight overall.
Kyousuke and Sekurtiti left the carnivore food storage room. They were in the off-limits underground space. The Bridesmaid group up top would have been knocked out by the incense, but they could not let their guard down. The incense could have missed some spots depending on the wind and it

was an occult incense. An incense expert like Ellie Slide might be able to overcome such things with a unique breathing method or a built-up resistance. Kyousuke did not want to continue fighting while carrying 4 defenseless people. He wanted to get out of here as soon as possible.
But there was one thing he had to check first.
After entering the room temperature underground corridor, he lowered Azalea to the floor. He had her sit with her back against the chilly concrete wall and faced her. The rose thorn yukata gave some indecent glimpses of bright skin at the chest, but the girl did not seem to care as her head slumped to the side.
Sekurtiti also lowered the shrine maiden sisters to the safe floor and then she shivered.
“What? I get being cold, but…why is my whole body sticky?”
“The cold storage room is an artificial environment and this one is storing a lot of raw meat, so it also functions as a storage tank for the moisture that seeps out into the air.”
“Hm? Hmm? I thought water froze at subzero temperatures.”
“It might sound strange, but you’ve seen something like frost on the inside of a fridge, right? Diamond dust might be visible, but not all of the moisture in the air freezes. Some of the moisture remains to move freely through the air, so the humidity never reaches 0%.”
However, showing off his knowledge was not going to dry off her body now that it felt like she had walked through some fog at night.
Kyousuke crouched down and fixed the chest of Azalea’s yukata which had grown wet in the room temperature, but then he asked a coldhearted question. He still had to find the Founder’s Gallery and acquire the Natural History’s missing entries.
“A question.”
“?”
He kept it short and blank-eyed Azalea tilted her head.
“Where is the Golden Treasure Chest?”
After losing, Azalea could not resist any external stimuli. No matter who they came from. Thus, her small lips replied readily and smoothly.
“In the left sleeve of my yukata…”
He reached inside and indeed found it there. It was an apple-sized box that looked more like an antique music box than a grand treasure chest. It was one of the original items that had been separated.
He now had the Golden Treasure Chest and the ancient map.
That just left the Diamond Master Key which had been taken from him.
“Where is the Diamond Master Key?”
“…?”
His question was met with silence.
But that was odd. To reiterate, Azalea could not resist any external stimuli now. She could not remain silent or lie.
“Claude should have it. The Diamond Master Key, that is.”

“I don’t know.”
He went further and mentioned that man’s name, but the result was the same.
Did that mean she had not received the Diamond Master Key from Claude? Or was there a more fundamental meaning?
“I don’t know what happened to Claude after that.”
It was Kyousuke’s turn to fall silent.
Azalea Magentarain could not lie. So what did this answer mean? He used his confused mind to think and arrived at a certain theory.
“Was Claude Magentarain not a member of Bridesmaid?”
The confused girl only tilted her head.
Unable to support the weight of her head, she fell on her side like a broken doll.
“Then where is the Diamond Master Key!?”
That was a rhetorical question.
Azalea did not know the answer, so he was not expecting her to speak. This only told him the Diamond Master Key was not in Bridesmaid’s hands and that he was less likely to be pursued by someone on Claude’s level. What he needed to do now was leave the zoo immediately and lose any pursuit Bridesmaid did send after him. He had to avoid letting anyone else interfere and possibly harm Renge, Higan, or Sekurtiti.
Nevertheless, all of those plans were driven from his mind a moment later. No, it may have been more accurate to say his mind was filled with pure white.

Yes.
White.
Someone gently embraced him from behind. Two slender arms reached over his shoulders. A soft and warm sensation surrounded the boy. A rosy aroma wafted in from the white hair behind him. A heated breath blew on his earlobe from close enough to bite it and *she* made an announcement as if speaking to a lover.
It was a sentence of death.
It was a proclamation of the world's end.
"Hee hee☆ Who do you think has it, my – dear – brother?"

Facts

- Azalea attacked Kyousuke and the others using Repliglass indistinguishable from herself. Incense Grenades do not react to them. Since Incense Grenades do work on Renge who is also entirely artificial, the older Joruri Method likely creates a more complete "human body".
- Sekurtiti has partially become divine even in life and her lifestyle seems to be very different from a normal person's, so eating a single sandwich is a struggle for her. But she does seem interested in the flavor of food.
- Bridesmaid's goal is to improve Repliglass technology and complete a fully artificial vessel that allows the White Queen to reside in this world indefinitely. It is unknown if they could complete it even with the rare materials they view Renge and Higan as, so they would still have to rely on the Natural History's missing entries.
- Azalea "opened" Renge's insides in the name of acquiring the technology, but everything seemed back in its rightful place by the time of the deal. This suggests Azalea somewhat succeeded in gaining an understanding of the Joruri Method.
- He had lost an eye and an arm, but Claude Magentarain was seen here. He attacked Kyousuke and Sekurtiti at the zoo and stole the Diamond Master Key.
- Azalea did not know that the Diamond Master Key had been stolen.
- The White Queen appeared! …Her time begins now.

Stage 03: Another Who Escaped Hell and Overcame Death

“Ahn?”
“So is 3A your bra si-…ow!!”
(Stage 03 Open 07/06 01:10)
Another Who Escaped Hell and Overcame Death

Part 1

I am the summoner known as Freedom Award 903, Alice (with) Rabbit. I made a lot of mistakes and got into a lot of trouble, but that helped me get much better at what I do. I am nothing like I used to be, so it would take a lot to get to me.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!
Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!”
Shiroyama Kyousuke felt something spark deep in his mind and all of his assumptions were blown away. He opened his mouth toward the ceiling, and released the overflowing disgust and hatred as a scream that felt like it would rend his throat asunder. He tried to fling his arms and legs wildly around like a child. No, all of his muscles and even his internal organs wriggled and convulsed like separate life forms and seemed to explode with motion as he tried to throw off and distance himself from the great evil clinging to his back.
But there was nothing he could do.
There were only two slender arms around him, but they easily robbed the puny human of all his freedom. In fact, the White Queen released occasional sweet voices as she accepted all the vibrations of his body and embraced him.

“Nn, hh, ha ha…☆ Further. Go further, brother. Release more of your animal side! Reach deep, deep, deep into your soul, find the urges your rational mind normally keeps sealed away, and reveal them before me. Don’t worry. No matter how ugly they might be, I will consume it down to the marrow and swallow every last drop. After all, this is Tanabata, the most romantic time of the year for two lovers to meet!!”
“Why…? I didn’t sense even a hint of your presence until now… Azalea hasn’t reached the Founder’s Gallery, no one has acquired the Natural History’s missing entries, and they haven’t made use of Renge or Higan. So it makes no sense for you to be heeeeeeeeeeeeere!”
“————. Mentioning 3 other girls in front of me? That’s quite the triple seven you hit there, brother. But I really want to make this work☆ I’ll overlook allllll of that, so you can indulge yourself as much as you want. Here, I’ll give you cheek rub, rub, ruuub☆”
“Gwooooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

enjoyed the sensation of his entire body rejecting her and then her fingers grabbed something.
It was an apple-sized chest that resembled an antique music box.
It was the Golden Treasure Chest.
“I think it’s about time I joined the game too. Yes, I have no use for this item whatsoever, but if I have it, I know you’ll come chasing after me, brother. Isn’t that right?”
“…”
The White Queen naturally knew that Shiroyama Kyousuke was after the Founder’s Gallery. And that he was doing so to find a way to destroy her.
But she did not crush the chest in her grasp.
She took it from him for the sole purpose of having fun with him. She preserved it. She was not at all concerned about the one-in-a-million or one-in-a-billion chance it might contain.
Was love really this brutal? Did it really blind one to logic and efficiency?
“Why, Queen…?”
“?”
“No matter how much you struggle, there’s no going back to how things were between us. You have to understand that.”
“Is that really so?”
She embraced him from behind, rubbed her cheek against his, blew a sweet breath on him, and asked the fundamental question.
“It’s true that you can never get along with me now. We have already passed that crossroads, so it would be incredibly difficult for our paths to merge once more. However…”
A spellbound, melting, and yet incredibly evil flower bloomed.
“If I send you plummeting down to the most transcendent depths imaginable so you mentally regress to a childlike state, won’t that revert time to before we passed that crossroads? True, you might forget how to speak and only babble like a baby, but, well, I’m confident I can love you just as much no matter what form you take. Kyah☆”
Shiroyama Kyousuke shuddered in fear.
This was not an obvious explosion of disgust like before. The fear chilling him to his core was silently washing in from another world.
It was this level of love that made her the White Queen.
And this was not some constant goal seen in all her previous actions. It had only just now occurred to her. She was just trying it out for now. If it worked, she would celebrate, but if it failed, she could just move on to the next thing. That was the extent of the thought she put into grabbing and toying with Shiroyama Kyousuke’s life or the entire world.
What did it matter if there was love behind it all?
What could it be called except for evil?
“Okay, brother. That’s all for tonight.”
The gentle warmth of a mother slipped away from his back and he could finally breathe again. He half crumpled to the ground and looked back just

in time to see the White Queen lightly kiss the Golden Treasure Chest she held. The ecstasy and self-absorption he saw there reminded him of the dancer girl who had won over a king with her sensual dance and acquired the head of a saint.
“Also. Since I will be taking part in this game, I will be giving you a little something in return. It isn’t much, but please take it.”
All she did was casually snap her fingers.
Immediately, the entire zoo shook with a tremor so sinister it seemed to squeeze at his heart.
Unable to support themselves, Kyousuke and Sekurtiti fell to the floor and failed to see how the White Queen had left. The next thing they knew, she was simply gone. In fact, they had to wonder if it had all been a dream or illusion.
“Shiroyama Kyousuke…”
“…”
Kyousuke could not answer Sekurtiti and simply crawled slowly over to grab Azalea and Fractal. He picked them up and then started toward the exit from this underground floor.
He knew something was not right. The din he heard and the tremor reaching his skin did not match up. With the explosive sounds he was hearing, cracks should have been running through the ceiling and the entire zoo should have been crushed so flat it was only 3 mm thick.
And yet he seemed separated from all that like he was sitting in the living room watching a news report about a war halfway around the world.
He was being protected by the Queen. That fact burned at his heart.
It was all over.
He saw countless unmoving figures below the cold Milky Way.
Even if Azalea had been defeated, just how many assassins had remained in the zoo? Just how much damage could they have caused if they began to rampage with the Summoning Ceremony and Repliglass? Kyousuke and Sekurtiti had used incense to stop the Offering Team from killing themselves, but he doubted that would have destroyed all of them. Breaking his way out should have taken quite some doing.
And yet…
Nevertheless…
He found absolute destruction. There was not even a scratch to the zoo’s ground. Infuriatingly enough, he found a definite pulse when he checked a few summoners collapsed nearby. The White Queen had instantly taken out all of the assassins in the zoo and she had intentionally let them all live. Needless to say, she had only done so because she knew that was what Kyousuke would want.
The difference in power was too great.
Her standards were so thoroughly broken that she did not hesitate to use that while truly only “playing a game”.
“…It’s begun.”

Kyousuke spoke as he blankly and somewhat furiously viewed the aftermath.
“Her time has begun…”

Part 2

Dawn arrived and the gentle morning sun conquered the Milky Way.
“…”
With her long and wavy blonde hair spread out and wearing only a thin red negligee with a spritz of rose perfume, The Saint slowly sat up on an extra-large bed in a suite. She then worked her groggy mind to remember why she was in a luxury hotel.
She had heard what had happened at the zoo. With their position of absolute safety overturned and with Azalea Magentarain and many other members lost, she and their remaining forces had quickly left their hideout using the haunted house’s back door. Losers of the summoning ceremony could not keep a secret even if they were not tortured. Once their location was known, Government and Illegal would pour in with great numbers. Needless to say, if it came to an all-out conflict, they could take on all three major powers stationed in Toy Dream 35. But they were only a bridesmaid for the pure white bride, so their great power was meant to add to her beauty.
It was out of the question for The Saint to protect herself with the treasures gathered for the Queen.
So she had chosen a swift retreat despite the difference in strength.
That was their unique way of thinking.
(Well, I’m sure there are some of our recruits who are afraid of revealing a personal weakness if they come into conflict with summoners from their old organizations.)
The Saint slowly got her mind working.
(And if the multiple organizations bring together their sources, they might reveal that we drove some of their groups to failure in order to recruit them.)
Even their personnel were gifts for the White Queen. They could not allow those celebratory gifts to be marred even slightly by any petty discord now.
Toy Dream 35 was a bankrupt regional city that was trying to recover as an amusement park. They needed to serve a great number of tourists, so there were plenty of lodging facilities. Staying at a suite under a fake name did not stand out here.

The reports from the scene had been fragmentary and inadequate, but she had heard that a pure white flash had been seen at the end. Did that mean someone had used the Summoning ceremony to carve out the name of the peak of the peak? Or…?
“Phew.”
Whatever the case, Bridesmaid had lost everything: the Diamond Master Key, the Golden Treasure Chest, and the ancient map. They did not have a single one of the hints needed to reach the Founder’s Gallery. And Azalea could have best made use of the Gallery’s information, but she had been defeated and could not be contacted.
But the Founder’s Gallery was not the only way of approaching the White Queen. Perhaps she needed to focus on regrouping their remaining forces, give up on the Gallery, and work at another method.
(No, I can’t.)
But The Saint rejected that idea.
With anything else, it would not have mattered, but things were different when they had to do with the White Queen.
(Bridesmaid must not pull our hand back from Her Majesty and turn the other way.)
That dark and cold flame had yet to be extinguished.
Her ability to make this decision may have been a sign of her faith.

“Nn…”
Meanwhile, a small boy of about 10 stirred in the same bed. The Saint’s movement had woken him.
The boy was simply known as the boy.
He was The Saint’s vessel, but he was not received coldly. For one thing, there was no clear master and servant between the two of them. But not because they both respected each other and gave them that privilege. There truly was “nothing” there.
“Oh, it’s morning… Should we do *that* then?”
Wearing only a thin red slip that gave off a rosy scent, The Saint reached for a coin on the bedside table. But this was not a tip for the room’s cleaner.
Reaching toward the bedside table caused one of the slip’s shoulder straps to fall down her arm, but the woman who could be called a sensual holy woman or a pure witch did not mind.
The Saint flipped the coin with her thumb and placed it on the back of her hand.
They both peered down at it.
“…Tails.”
The change was dramatic.
The Saint rolled out of the large bed, got down on one knee, and bowed her head. Conversely, the boy slowly placed his feet on the floor and calmly stood up.

This was their daily ritual.
A flip of the coin determined everything. Heads and The Saint was master for the day; tails and the boy was. They would not resent whichever result they received.
“Good morning, master. Breakfast…would be difficult to prepare in a hotel. We can call room service for that, so I will prepare a bath for now.”
The boy waved a hand while toying with the egg-shaped GPS security buzzer he wore as a restraint for mental stability. With permission granted, The Saint crossed the wide room and entered the next room while wearing a slip that left her legs exposed all the way up to the base of her thighs.
The boy worked his sleepy mind to think on the situation.
In truth, the boy did not particularly care if The Saint was a holy woman, a witch, his master, or his servant. He only wanted to be with her, no matter what form it took. Or to put it another way, he had no interest in the past or future and he simply wanted the “present” to continue forever.
Ultimately, this perfectly ordinary boy did not even care about the White Queen. He just knew that failing to pursue her would lead that woman to leave him and would destroy the “present”, so he went along with it. He had a special kind of stagnant mentality that refused to think even a second into the future, but in a way, he may have had the strongest mind of all. Even in the face of that pure white, he was able to stay true to himself without being dyed by longing or hatred.
The Saint returned with her bright thighs still bared.
“I never realized that a large bathtub would have its own problems. It will probably take about 20 minutes to fill.”
“Nn.”
“What would you like to do until then? You could always take just a shower first.”
He shook his head at that. If they had time to wait, there was something he wanted to get done in that time.
He pointed the summoner toward the window and they sat at the same table there. Spread out on the table were the fragmentary reports from the tragedy at the zoo early that morning.
The boy glanced through the reports as casually as someone reading through an English language newspaper with breakfast. The Saint seemed focused on where Shiroyama Kyousuke and Sekurtiti had gone, but the boy thought pursuing them would be a waste of time. Both enemy and ally had shown up at the zoo for the exchange. They would have covered their tracks when leaving, so there would be nothing to pursue.
“Here.” The boy tapped at one of the reports on the table. “The others couldn’t pick up everything they said, but a certain name shows up at a few points in what we have: Claude Magentarain. It seems odd that both Azalea and Shiroyama brought him up.”

“Are you suggesting one or both sides are sheltering that person? The Magentarain name is concerning, but Azalea is something of a heretic in her family.”
“That isn’t the important part.” The boy pointed at a spot on another page. “No one ever did see the Diamond Master Key that night. The report suggests that Shiroyama didn’t want to give it up, but then this doesn’t make any sense.”
“…That he temporarily handed over Sekurtiti?”
“Shiroyama’s response to the Offering Team is proof enough that he prioritizes human life, so it doesn’t make sense that he offered the ancient map before the key.”
“But wasn’t that his method of retrieving Meinokawa Higan?”
“…Has anyone proven that?”
Shiroyama Kyousuke had never once brought out the Diamond Master Key. What if that was not due to reluctance or as part of a plan? What if he had some pressing reason preventing him from doing so?
And if both Shiroyama and Azalea did not have the key, where was it now?
“Claude Magentarain. We need to look into him.”
“Understood.”
This clearly ran counter to The Saint’s intent to directly pursue Shiroyama Kyousuke or Azalea, but she did not protest. That intent had been yesterday’s way of thinking and it no longer applied thanks to the coin toss.
“Hopefully, he’ll have the key. But even if he doesn’t, capturing him should force both Shiroyama and Azalea to act. He will make a good starting point.”
“Your discerning eye never ceases to amaze me. Losing Azalea and the Natural History’s missing entries is unfortunate, but that is not what Bridesmaid truly seeks. In order to more perfectly learn what Her Majesty likes and to become even better servants, let us continue our pursuit of the Founder’s Gallery. Oh, it would seem the bath is ready.”
After hearing a light beeping, the woman in the red slip lifted her butt from the chair. The boy watched her and also thought to himself.
The possible presence of the master key was only secondary to him. He was not actually interested in the White Queen, so he was equally disinterested in the Founder’s Gallery and the Natural History’s missing entries. His focus was on something else: Claude Magentarain.
That boy who loved the “present” could intuitively tell that man would bring about some kind of major change. Ignoring him could easily lead to losing that woman.

Part 3

“Zukooon.”
After preparing enough breakfast for everyone on the top floor of the luxury apartment where Aika lived, Biondetta sounded as exasperated as if she had been presented with a bed of nails.
She bent her hips, set plates down on the glass table, shook her tail, and showed off her thighs between the black knee socks and the risqué bottom of her Oiran-style mini-yukata.
“So after I went to so much trouble removing the other 23 possible locations for you, the Diamond Master Key has gone missing and the Golden Treasure Chest was stolen by the Queen? And retrieving the hostages was only a detour. Our goal wasn’t the tomb keepers or the twin shrine maidens; it was the Founder’s Gallery and the Natural History’s missing entries, wasn’t it? What are you even doing, you useless little brother?”
Biondetta even added a lineup of brown bottles full of antibiotics no one else wanted.
She may have been right.
If they were only after the Founder’s Gallery, then what he had done was indeed mostly a detour. He would not acquire the missing entries by rescuing someone. Government would have retrieved the passed-out members of Bridesmaid along with the traps Kyousuke had set up around the zoo, but he doubted they would provide any further hints. But as long as he went by the name Alice (with) Rabbit, he could not abandon a life about to be lost before his eyes. Especially when those lives would be lost due to a distortion caused by the White Queen.
And more importantly…
“C-can someone please explain to me what is going on with Claude Magentarain and the White Queen? What happened, why did it happen, and where did the Diamond Master Key and Golden Treasure Chest end up?”
“Oh? It isn’t often you don’t have a complete grasp of the situation, Onii-chan. Is this an especially tricky one?”
Even before the food had arrived, Aika had been sitting at the glass table and fidgeting in her swimsuit. She sat with her legs below her and her ankles angled out to either side, her hands were planted on the floor between her thighs, and her bikini butt was wiggling restlessly.
The breakfast Biondetta had made had as much oil and cream as carbonara and her huge sweet tooth led her to make truly devastating drinks and desserts, but Aika’s messed-up sleep schedule meant she was fully awake early in the morning and she put little concern for her health into her meals. The two of them seemed to be a good match here.
The only part of this Kyousuke could call a win was rescuing all of the hostages. The Diamond Master Key and the Golden Treasure Chest had been stolen, but he still had the ancient map. Renge, Higan, and Sekurtiti were safe and they had captured Azalea and Fractal.
It felt like the derailed last train had finally been brought back on track. They were already at the point where they could observe the White Queen

without an Artificial Sacred Ground, but they could still get a new start on this. No one else could force them to action and they could continue at their own pace.
Speaking of Renge and Higan…
“H-hey, Onii-chan? Those shrine maiden sisters are wandering over toward the liger again, so do something about it.”
“Really? Again!?”
“Why are people’s souls so inexorably drawn toward warm fluffiness? Even in their mindless state, they may be affected by a desire to return to their starting point…that is, the womb.”
“I really doubt this is anything so profound. And Higan! Not that way!!”
The blonde shrine maiden was slowly crawling toward the strongest creature, so Kyousuke grabbed her by the hips and pointed her in a different direction like a toy train. The white liger herself looked a little frightened, like a wild animal coming across the light and noise of a smartphone for the first time, but that was not a good thing. A wild beast was at its strongest not when it was hunting but when it came across something irregular and felt the need to protect itself.
The twins would most likely be back to normal that afternoon.
Repeating the same action endlessly was the same as continually using up energy without any rest, so he wanted to feed them if possible. But…
“Tah dah! Today’s breakfast is cream pasta, which counts as noodles and stew at the same time. But I made sure to make it Hokkaido-style by adding in plenty of potatoes, carrots, and broccoli, so it should go down easy despite its full volume.”
“…None of that sounds like something I want to eat in the morning.”
“The secret to increasing the illusion of luxury is to add a square of butter on top☆”
“I really don’t think this is Hokkaido-style! Are you sure it isn’t just the potatoes and butter making you think that!?”
Kyousuke doubted this breakfast would go down easy anywhere except for at a judo training camp, but he could not refuse what he was served.
“What about you, Sekurtiti?”
“If you give me a small plate of it, I will make an attempt. It has a very fascinating aroma.”
Modified China Dress Lu Niang Lan had not said a word this entire time, but she only held her raised knees between her arms, collapsed onto her side, and wallowed in her melancholy. She did an impressive job of reminding him of a cicada shell.
“Heh. Eh heh heh. Showing off your cooking skills and winning everyone over through their stomachs used to be my job. She’s taken everything from me…”
“Lu-san. That doesn’t matter and you should probably get up. Your underwear is pretty much entirely exposed right now.”

“Ah!? W-what am I doing? Was I hoping to win Kyousuke-chan over that way just because I was losing sight of myself? I am the Perfect Dragon who killed Government Award 1000 barehanded. I need to have more confidence in myself.”
“What does a look at your panties matter? My client has gotten a nice look at my white and pink stripes, so it’s nothing to worry about.”
“Ohh!? She beat me to the punch there too!?”
The modified China dress truly started to sink into an invisible bog, so it looked like ignoring her for the time being would be the best option. Also, the temperature of Sekurtiti’s gaze had been dropping ever since the topic of panties came up, so he really wanted to change the subject.
Then again…
“It’s not like you’re any match for the girl only wearing bandages and some decorative lace. She was wearing a yukata yesterday, but she’s reverted to this at some point.”
“Ahem. That was only a disguise meant to blend into the crowd so we could rescue the hostages. There was no real reason to continue wearing it. … More importantly, Shiroyama Kyousuke, do you really think a girl’s underwear is more than just a piece of cloth? Do you see more value in it than is evident at face value?”
“If you think that’s going to make you sound normal, I’ll have to seriously ask you if you really don’t see how wearing only bandages is perverted. And don’t think you can get out of this by calling it your uniform.”
Kyousuke’s expression was entirely serious, but Biondetta’s was entirely the opposite as she whispered to him from the side.
“By the way, I actually haven’t been wearing any underwear since I changed into the yukata.”
“Bff!?”
Not even Kyousuke could ignore that comment.
“W-wait… You mean even back then…or the other time when you were going a little crazy?”
“Neh heh☆ Then do you want to see for yourself?”
With a devilish look on her face, Biondetta gently grabbed the sides of her mini yukata’s hem and emphasized how close to the very base of her thighs it was.
The chaos continued as they ate breakfast.
Biondetta’s incredibly misguided selection turned out to be as terrible a choice as Kyousuke had expected, but the skill of her cooking was not bad. It would have been perfect if he was coming back to it after an exhausting day instead of waking up to it.
“Nhh! Cough, cough!!”
The brown bandage girl (with Y-shaped lace decoration) choked after eating just a little bit, but when Kyousuke tried to rub her back, she held out a hand to stop him. She seemed to be enjoying it, so this may have been her

way to experience it. It was more like playing with fire than supplying nutrients.
The smell seemed to draw out the white liger's hunger, but she ate a gigantic hunk of raw meat like normal. It looked wild, but this was because a pure carnivore's digestive system was surprisingly delicate. Unlike omnivores like humans, carnivores were restricted to only meat.
"Scallops," said Aika. "I don't see any at all, but I can taste scallops in this…! So good..!!"
"Well done noticing the secret ingredient paste I added, little lady. After all, this is Hokkaido-style."
"But it oddly doesn't compete with the meaty flavor of the thick-cut bacon!?"
"That's just how wonderful Hokkaido is. And if you eat it in such a hurry, you'll get your cute cheeks and modest chest covered in the sticky white sauce. Or are you doing that on purpose?"
"Stop that."
When Sekurtiti lightly scolded them with the golden tiara on her head, Biondetta worked with Sekurtiti to wipe off Aika's mouth and chest.
Kyousuke started to think he should leave Biondetta here instead of in his cruiser. The seasonal Oiran mini-yukata demon was pulling off history's greatest performance as a shut-in sitter.
"So, Kyousuke-chan, what are you going to do now?"
In the name of observing the enemy, Lu Niang Lan took a spoonful of the cream pasta soup (it was mostly a white stew) and tasted it with the tip of her tongue. She also cut to the heart of the matter. Her bad mood may have made her feel like being a little mean.
Kyousuke spun his fork around for no reason as he answered.
"Whatever we do, we'll have to settle each thing in turn. Our main focus will of course be on Claude Magentarain. Since he isn't connected to Azalea and Bridesmaid, we can probably throw out the theory that he's made from some detailed humanoid Repliglass. In that case, we need to start making some guesses as to how the real Claude would have started working with the White Queen and pursuing the Founder's Gallery. Nothing is as frightening as fighting someone whose actions you can't explain."
He could only come up with 2 possibilities.
Either Claude himself was seeking the Founder's Gallery or he was trying to prevent Kyousuke from reaching it.
"If he is interfering because he's afraid I'll find a way to oppose the Queen, then I think the Diamond Master Key and the Golden Treasure Chest will have already been destroyed."
"Munch, munch. You don't look too concerned about that possibility, sir."
"In that case, the Queen would have crushed the chest as soon as she took it from me at the zoo. Since she went out of her way to take it back with her, I doubt it has been destroyed *for the time being*."
Of course.

Knowing the White Queen, she very well might have been waiting to slowly crush it underfoot in front of him at a later date. And with both the chest and key, they could unlock the former. He had to be on the lookout for despair on the level of finally taking it back and finding it empty or finding the real data swapped out with something completely unrelated.
“But this also changes depending on the relationship between Claude and the Queen. If he’s purely a worshiper, he’ll do anything she asks. If he’s trying to use her for his own purposes, then he would have control of what they do. And in that case…”
“Then it would be more than just the Queen’s selfishness. Claude would have to have a reason to go after the key and chest.”
Sekurtiti soaked the tip of her fork in the white soup as she spoke. She did not seem to observe Aika using a spoon to scoop up as much as she wanted across the table.
Kyousuke fell silent for a moment.
He recalled what that man had said:
“The Natural History’s missing entries and the Queen’s territory beyond that are too much for you to handle. Leave this to a ghost from the past. If I feel like it, I’ll give you some of the leftover scraps. …You see, I too have business with her.”
The eyepatched man had definitely said that as he smiled and adroitly stole the Diamond Master Key.
“Is Claude after the Founder’s Gallery? He did mention the Natural History’s missing entries. But if so, what for…? To create a doll or artificial vessel like Azalea wanted?”
If Kyousuke was going to start somewhere, it had to be there.
Also, it did not sit right with him that Claude was seeking the Founder’s Gallery and yet already had the completed White Queen with him.
If he was trying to place the Queen’s soul inside an artificial vessel just like Azalea, then it was possible his was incomplete and could only be activated temporarily. And if he would be able to fill in the missing piece once he reached the Founder’s gallery, the White Queen would gain eternal stability in this world.
If that theory was correct, it would truly mean the end of the world.
“…”
Meanwhile, it did not particularly matter to Kyousuke if Claude was the first to discover the Founder’s Gallery. He could always tail them to the location. Of course, that would require him to defeat Claude before the man achieved his goal. It would be difficult to find a way to safely hand over the ancient map on Sekurtiti’s back, but if he could disguise it as a coincidence…yes, if he had a detailed analysis of the Lifelong Emblem on her back done at a hospital, and then intentionally let that data leak out, he could get it to Claude.

“Whether to defeat him or manipulate him, his location is what matters. I just hope we can find a way to locate him.” Kyousuke stopped spinning his fork around.
And he spoke.
“Lu-san. I’d like to purchase something fairly dangerous from your Illegal supply shop. Can you calculate out how much it’ll cost me?”

Part 4

The one-armed man with a leather eyepatch over his right eye had his long blond hair slicked back and tied behind his head.
Claude Magentarain relaxed. He was in the nicest of all the sleeper trains that ran to and from Toy Dream 35. The train’s luxurious interior was designed in the European style and it remained stopped longer than it ran. Of its 15 cars, the back 5 were normal sleeper cars, the middle 5 were entertainment facilities such as a restaurant, a casino, and a theater, and the front 5 were each individual suites. Claude naturally had the prime spot of the first car. Of course, he would be the first one crushed like an empty can in an accident, so the luxury was reminiscent of the Sword of Damocles. He looked in the mirror, poked at the eyepatch over his right eye, and shook his head which still ached dully.
I’ve changed too, he thought as he looked at his face in the mirror.
He had lost an eye at the Queen’s Miniature Garden and he had lost his dominant arm in his life after that. What had he gained in exchange? The flow of time had placed years on his soul whether he liked it or not.
(What a pain. Are my thoughts growing so poetic because of the alcohol I had yesterday?)
However, a real man did not rely on herbal medicines or energy drinks at a time like this.
A hardcore man’s morning began with a cup of whisky.
Someone who ordered a single malt on the rocks with a subdued look on his face was not much different from someone who forced himself to drink his coffee black. Intentionally mixing in some kind of impurity was the best way to draw out the quality of the primary ingredient. For example, a sprig of mint or some cigar smoke. That was enough to transform the drink in any number of ways. Only a child would take everything at face value. By the time you were old enough to enjoy alcohol, you had to be a big enough person to think about how to draw out the inner side of your partner.
However…

“Huh? Where’d my Queen on the Ice ’12 go? Isn’t it usually right here? I don’t care how drunk I was; I seriously doubt I would misplace my drink bottles.”
“I threw them out. Every last one.”
“You what!?”
The expressionless girl named 3A suddenly popped in from the side and Claude yelled at her at the top of his lungs. Her hair color was more ice than silver and her eyes were colder than perpetual snow. Her body was too tiny to call delicate, but she was actually 15, demonstrating how bizarre modern technology had become. Her dress had a long skirt and a blue ribbon on the chest. It was so thin that her slender silhouette showed through in the backlight, but that was a trick. It was only an optical effect meant to hide all the weapons hidden inside.
She was an assassin who had used special breathing methods and organ movements to intentionally disturb her hormonal balance and reject her secondary sex characteristics as a way to walk right up to her targets.
Claude shouted hysterically at the demonic sword that had been honed down so sharply that it looked like it would break in two.
“Threw them out? Wh-what do you think you’re doing!? Why would you do that!? Are you stupid!? Don’t you know the amount of Queen on the Ice produced was drastically limited due to a worker’s strike, the underground reserves were wiped out by a major cold wave, South America’s cheap Sol Diablo killed the company’s stock value, and it’s only sold at exorbitant prices by professional resellers on online auctions!?”
“The window was open, so I thought…why not?”
“You didn’t even use the trash can!? That’s just plain dangerous!! Also, that absurdly high price says nothing about the quality of the drink. Nothing at all.”
No one would have questioned the large and muscular man if he had claimed to be a professional pirate, but his shoulders drooped when the child scolded him.
“…Everyone’s favorite dandy can’t work up any energy without his fuel.”
“I had a feeling you would say that. Drunk Man, here is a new bottle.”
“?”
Just by looking at her, 3A’s lovely silhouette seemed to show through her dress, but she now held a bottle of colorfully green liquid in her small hand and passed it to Claude, who frowned.
“What’s this? A liqueur? This scent…is it mint flavored? What do you mix it with?”
“You swish it in your mouth.”
“Bfhhh!! Cough, cough! This is mouthwash! I just chugged like half of it!!”
There were baseless rumors that said swallowing mouthwash or toothpaste would give you a trippy experience or that putting eye drops in an alcoholic beverage would put it on the level of a sleeping pill, but nothing like that happened here.

3A remained expressionless but formed a small triangle with her mouth as she put a Gozaru Samurai puppet on her right hand and made it talk.
“(You reek. Whatever’s coming back up from your stomach makes you smell like an alcoholic gutter. Can’t you take proper care of yourself? And why do I have to pay for it in the form of this stench? Do you want me to cut open your gut, pull out your stomach, and wash it out with a neutral detergent?)”
“I can hear that! I can hear everything you’re saying, young girl. And Gozaru wouldn’t speak in that chilling of a voice!! A-and being told I reek by a girl really hurts this dandy’s heart, you know? Heh. But if you want to show off your femininity, could you do it in the form of boobs?”
“Ahn?”
“So is 3A your bra si-…ow!!”
A heavy thud rang out. It was the windlass pike. The storage device was more like a solid vise than a fishing reel and it had fallen right onto Claude’s little toe.
“Are you stupid!? Don’t you know the difference between a joke and-…”
“Did that wake you up, you piece of shit? Enough that you don’t need to rely on a hair of the dog?”
3A looked coldly down on Claude as he held his toe and writhed around on the floor, but she was actually sadly dedicated to him. It might look like she was rebelling against her master’s orders, but deep down she was showing her concern for his health.
And that was the opposite of what Claude wanted.
After crushing a certain criminal organization, he had happened to pick up 3A who the organization had been keeping like a pet. She had essentially been a machine that did nothing more than swiftly kill whoever she was told to. Feeling responsible for her after picking her up, he had decided to look after the girl until she was independent enough to seek freedom even if it mean killing her temporary master. But at this rate, her dependence was only going to grow and she was even working against his initial goal.
(I really need to do something about this soon…)
Claude gave that topic some serious thought, but then 3A held down her dress’s skirt as she looked down at him.
“What do you think you’re doing with that serious expression on your face? Going for the low angle like that is the absolute worst…”
“Hold on just a second. You’re the one that set things up like this. And even if I did look up your skirt, all I’d see are a ton of blades and some cute little cotton- dobwah!?”
She kicked him in the back and the pirate began mimicking a shrimp.
3A ignored that and pulled out the key hanging at her dress’s chest on a thin chain.
“Are you sure you want me to hold onto this?”
“Gh, cough… Yes, yes. After all, it’s safest with you. I can’t exactly put it in the room’s safe. Even if someone doesn’t know its value in our industry, it still has a 30-carat diamond in it. Anyone could try to steal it.”

Claude pouted his lips as he answered, but then he got up and approached the nearby amber-colored closet.
In fact, he opened the double doors.
The back of the closet and the back of the opened doors were entirely covered in paper documents.
The paper came in a variety of types: from old papyrus and parchment to modern waterproof paper and high-resolution photosensitive paper. The small writing and diagrams filling the papers were not limited to any specific religion or mythology. They included Pygmalion, crystal skulls, *sokushinbutsu*[1], Joan of Arc's heart, and organs pickled in salt. They were all legends from all over the world concerning the preservation of the human body or the creation of dolls.
The various rectangles of paper were gathered together into a single shape. It almost looked like a human silhouette made from pixels.
"You've gathered most of it, haven't you?"
"That just goes to show how surprisingly irresponsible the world is. And I honestly thought I'd be stopped somewhere before I had all of this together."
It was still only the silhouette.
But some letters of the alphabet were placed over its head like an angel's halo: iu – nu – fb – a – wuh – ei – kx – eu – pl – vjz.
That name had transformed history. It was the pure white descended upon a world of vibrant color. If you still could not tell what he was trying to do at this point, you had unfortunately failed to study up on the world's laws.
One piece was blatantly missing. There was a large hole where the heart should be.
"Everything is here. They were right when they called the human body a miniature universe."
"…Who are you calling miniature?"
"If you know that would refer to you, why would you-…no, never mind."
Claude sadly retracted his opinion and poked at the missing heart of the silhouette on the wall.
His fingertip tapped on the chic wood.
"The Natural History's missing entries, huh?"
"What do you plan to do with it once you complete it?"
Claude did not answer 3A's question.
He instead closed the closet with both hands.
"Anyway, you take care of the key needed to reach the gallery. That's the safest plan."
"If you say so."
"Well, I'll admit I'm a little worried that your flat chest is somewhat lacking in the cushioning department. Gwa ha ha ha-…ow!! Wait, stop! Don't climb on top of me and pin me down! There's no ref here, so this only leads to an infinite hell!!"

The train was stopped and yet the sleeper car's suspension began to creak, but then they were interrupted. However, it was not a righteous conductor growing suspicious of the man staying with a much younger girl who did not seem to be his daughter. For one thing, normal people could not perceive Claude while he was outside their field of vision. 3A was a different matter because she had been intentionally kept at a lower Award level (so she could kill summoners and vessels too).
The window and the entire wall around it were blown away and another summoner and vessel walked inside.
It was a nun in a graceful habit and a small boy. Unlike with Claude, the boy seemed to be leading the nun. Relationships between a summoner and a vessel came in all kinds. But in most of them, the two partners had some kind of distortion that only applied to them.
And there was no need to immediately jump to the occult just because this destruction could not be done by human hands. This was a sleeper train, but it was currently stopped and attaching an explosive to the outside wall would suffice.
They could also have set up enough to blow the entire car to smithereens, but they had gone out of their way to arrive as a summoner and vessel. Assuming they were not just dumb, that meant there was something inside the car they did not want blown up. For example, the silver key with a 30-carat diamond that hung from 3A's neck and hid in her modest chest.
"Off you go." Claude gently pushed the girl off of him. "That was faster than I expected."
He sounded impressed. Only Shiroyama Kyousuke and those close to him would know that the Diamond Master Key had been stolen, but he doubted they would have let anyone else know that. It had to have been difficult to find Claude's name in the fragmentary data and it could not have been easy tracking down his accurate location and putting together this attack plan given how many fake names and fake IDs he had used. And yet these two had done it in such a short time. Their speed was worth praising. It was a shame they would not be recognized for this anywhere.
The small boy waved his hand.
"Dorothea, explain."
"Of course. The Founder's Gallery is a stepping stone to allow us to better understand and better reach Her Majesty. So we have no reason whatsoever to stop. We will start by making a recovery here. We will have you tell us everything you know and give us everything you have."
The nun spoke smoothly, bit her index finger with her canine tooth, and then brought her lips to it. When she pulled the finger away as if pulling something out, a single long and thick stick was pulled stickily out along with sweet saliva.
It was a Blood-Sign.
In a certain world, this was the same as throwing a glove at your opponent's face.

“Hmm,” groaned Claude at length.
At some point, something like a shiny and varnished amber-colored baton had appeared in his hand. When he lightly swung it, it extended to nearly 2 meters in length. It was structure just like the special batons used by police, but due to the man’s pirate captain look, it may have reminded more people of the telescopes of an older age.
“Well, I suppose this is right in a way. Since someone like you showed up, the Natural History’s missing entries must be the real deal. If I obediently follow this thread, I bet I’ll find the ‘answer’. I can feel it waiting for me.”
And Claude was missing an arm. He could not hold a Blood-Sign accurately with just the one. He held the grip near the bottom while 3A held it between her index and middle fingers near the tip to help him aim.
It was just like a three-legged race.
But while demonstrating frighteningly smooth teamwork, Claude Magentarain sounded truly troubled.
“But, well, you look even dumber than I’d expected.”

Part 5

They had moved to the used tool store run by the modified China dress beauty in C Block’s Chinatown.
“Was it hard getting here with the containers everywhere? Sorry the entire area reeks of fireworks.”
“If it wasn’t you saying that, I wouldn’t be so worried.”
“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about this time. This job is above board. It’s just that everywhere needs some fireworks right now. Fireworks these days are pretty amazing. They come in containers as a single module that turns back and forth like a fan while launching fireworks according to a program. They can easily launch 10,000 of them a minute.”
“Why does Chinatown love fireworks so much? Especially during the largescale lux restrictions in place for looking at the stars during Tanabata.”
“That’s because we all want to go a little nuts the instant Tanabata is over and the restrictions are removed.”
Lu Niang Lan of Illegal had brought them some information.
She leaned over the counter and waved a report held together with a metal clip.
“I didn’t find anything on Claude Magentarain, but a search for 3A did turn up something. That stands for All-Around Armament, right? Is this her?”

Claude Magentarain. Kyousuke and the others had visited C Block's Chinatown to pick up the "product" they needed to lure out that unseen opponent.
And while they were there, the modified China dress beauty rested her elbows on the counter of her shop, squished her large chest against the counter, and explained what she had found.
"Of all the things you could've run across, it turns out she's like a later model of me. The Perfect Dragon was only unintentionally created, but this project analyzed me from a variety of angles and attempted to stably mass-produce more of me. That's the Illegal-sponsored 3A project. And this girl seems to be a successful product of that."
With her glossy black hair and clear blue eyes, Lu Niang Lan was not pure Chinese, European, Indian, Latina or anything else. She was one candidate for the creation of a truly superior race by mixing bloodlines from every race around the globe. She was an excellent vessel and she also had the skill to slay a top rate summoner without using the Summoning Ceremony. And she had in fact killed Government Award 1000 barehanded.
Between the three major powers, Government and Illegal were the most directly opposed to each other and they faced 2 major problems. The first was whether or not they could freely use Repliglass and other cutting-edge equipment. The second was the number of vessels they had. Government was increasing their number of summoners using systematic military-style training, but they were chronically short on vessels who were reliant on a certain type of inborn talent. That was what kept Government from relying on pure numbers.
That said, Illegal did not have an abundant source of vessels either.
In that case, what would they search for? For one, they would try to secure as many vessels as they could. But at the same time, what if they found a way to reduce their opponent's numbers without using their own summoners and vessels?
If they had a great number of the 3As, a standardized and mass-produced unit of Lu Niang Lans, that would become possible. They would begin a new age in which masters of ordinary martial arts could exterminate the occult. Of course, that was only if the technique at the foundation of the plan was complete.
"They have their overall theory, but it seems like they haven't had much success. They've just had this one girl who developed more than the rest."
"If that's the best they can do, then I'm sorry to say the project might not have a future."
"Oh, is that so? You could tell that much?"
"If that girl had really reproduced what you can do, I would've died at that zoo. She couldn't even land a surprise attack, so she clearly hasn't reached your level."

He was not being figurative or modest. If he was unable to use the Summoning Ceremony, then he would be helpless against that modified China dress beauty. That was one situation he never wanted to plan for.
“Still, I’m sure Illegal will continue with this. Even if they know it’s all a farce.” Lu Niang Lan flipped through the report she placed on the counter. “Being a worthless child in the underworld is always a tragic thing. A lot of people mistakenly think it’s a kind adult’s duty to give them value. They’ll probably continue working and failing. Maybe they’ll make a breakthrough and maybe they’ll finally realize they can never break through that wall.”
“Lu-san…”
“I’m fine. My body was made entirely in the search of what was most logical. If Illegal is purely seeking power, there won’t be any room for more sleazy desires. They won’t keep people in animal cages like when I was in Government.”
Government Award 1000.
That tyrannical king had been nothing like Award 2799, Humanism, that Kyousuke had seen in the Queen’s Miniature Garden. He had been an incarnation of selfishness that had swallowed up the word “justice”. Just thinking about him made Kyousuke grimace. There was nothing positive there.
“…Let’s get back to 3A.”
“Right. Their stable mass-production project didn’t go as planned and the research group needed some extra funds, so they seem to have started renting out the relatively successful 3A in the name of field testing her. She was basically a mercenary. She did a fair bit of work, but she suddenly disappeared one day. Some other summoner crushed the organization she had been rented out to.”
“So was that Claude Magentarain?”
“The research group seemed to think she was buried below the rubble. They said she couldn’t be given any further commands without the Quartz Pendulum made from artificial crystal. And if 3A did start to regain a sense of self for some reason, I think we can all guess why that ‘miracle’ occurred.”
None of that conflicted with the Claude Magentarain Kyousuke knew. And that made it all the more confusing why he would be fixated on the Diamond Master Key and Golden Treasure Chest, be seeking the Founder’s Gallery, and be working with the White Queen in any form or fashion.
With that proper past and twisted present, Kyousuke could not get a firm grasp of who Claude was.
Had that oppressive charisma swallowed and remade Claude just as it had Azalea?
“If 3A is in Toy Dream 35, we should be able to search for her with a photo of her face. Unlike Claude himself, she isn’t a high Award summoner, so normal people can perceive and remember her. I recommend begging that shut-in girl to let you use her public agency.”

However, that was limited to the areas visible by cameras.
Modern analysis technology did not need a head-on shot. They could create a color palette for the area around the face and use the target's gait to identify them, but if the target was aware of that in advance, there were countermeasures they could take. Even if they occasionally made a mistake, there would not be surveillance records for every moment of the day. It would be best to use that to narrow down the range of a search and then use something else as a finishing blow.
"Lu-san, do you have what I asked for?"
"This, right? Just to be clear, this was not easy to get ahold of. Ohh, I'm so glad I had a chance to reclaim my honor."

Part 6

The battle was over and the Artificial Sacred Ground had vanished.
Claude rested his retractable Blood-Sign on his shoulder and muttered to himself.
"Dammit. This is the problem with these religious cults. Win or lose, nothing good ever comes of it."
The luxurious suite room had been entirely trashed. And not just the furniture and interior; the walls and ceiling had been blown away, turning it into an open-air car. Since there was no explaining this to the conductor, they would have to leave immediately. Being a high Award summoner who was quickly forgotten came in handy at times like this.
"What about the documents in the closet? It's hard to even tell which scraps were the closet."
"Not a problem."
Claude casually shook his blond hair and tapped his pirate-like eyepatch with a fingertip. Almost like he was indicating his lost eye.
"I've got it all here."
When Claude jumped out through a large hole in the wall that had split open like a burst can, there was no real disappointment on his face. He then spoke to 3A who followed him in her dress that let her silhouette show through (or that appeared to in order to hide all her weapons).
"What's all that stuff you're holding there?"
"Gozaru Samurai, Bubble-kun the Raccoon, and Onbu-chan the Monster Tanuki. It's too bad there's no sign of the Phantom Girl even here in Toy Dream 35."

“Why are you taking that crap with-…ow! Idiot, not the shin! Don’t kick me in the shin!”
Claude hopped back a bit, but…
“W-well, I do have one thing to thank you for.”
“?”
“Since you threw out all the drink bottles on the shelf, I was able to give up this hideout without any real regret. Thank you very much.”
“If you could stop being so full of yourself, you might actually be a model citizen. Good medicine is hard to swallow, so should I break your nose? Or would going for the balls work better?”
“Heh. Don’t be silly. My big magnum is too much for a little girl like you to handle. Grabbing it with your tiny little hands wouldn’t accomplish anything. In fact, it’d probably toss you around. Hah hah!”
“If you don’t shut up right this instant, we’re going to find out how you like being kicked there.”
The two of them continued their discussion as they walked below the monorail track. Claude’s vessel, the bird of prey, was circling elegantly overhead.
“Where should we hide next?”
“Anywhere’s fine. Every Toy Dream city has plenty of hotels to serve all of the tourists. How about a luxury cruise ship with a pool? Unlike China, Japan’s Tanabata apparently has a lot of events linked to bathing. Oh, I’m sorry. I suppose a 15-year-old with a body of such modest proportions she has to use a name like 3A wouldn’t want to wear a swimsuit at a resort pool, would-…oof!?”
True to her warning, 3A kicked her master hard enough that he rose from the ground a few centimeters and then rolled along the ground. She then looked down at him like he was a dung beetle. Claude crouched down in the world’s most pathetic way and hopped up and down for a while.
“You…hold on…I’m trying to focus.”
“I wonder what would happen if I kicked you again.”
“Nnnnnnn! Nnnnnnnnn!!”
“So what were you saying had modest proportions?”
“Y-your diet has a modest proportion of sodium!! So your chest is quite healthy!!”
She must have not felt like dealing with his nonsense because she finally released Claude. He immediately started hopping again.
“You really hit my balls cleanly into the bunker. It’s artistic in a way! I’m having a hard time figuring out how to get them back on the green, dammit…”
“More importantly.”
3A ignored Claude’s shout of “What could be more important than this!?” and she looked overhead.
No, she looked at…
“Your partner is acting oddly.”

“3A, you’ve always been quite the sadistic perv-…no, I didn’t say anything. So what’s that about Ricky?”
Claude also looked in that direction.
And the eyepatch man saw…

Part 7

The situation changed just before noon.
“Ah!?”
The black-haired shrine maiden suddenly sat up on the top floor of a luxury apartment.
Meinokawa Renge had no idea why she was here and she shuddered at the unfamiliar flavor she found in her mouth.
“Huh? What was I doing? What happened!? The date on the TV is different and what happened with Azale-…with all that???”
And before even checking on her disheveled clothing, she checked for her sister. She looked around the area in a panoramic view.
“~ ~ ~”
She did indeed see a blonde shrine maiden (with a flushed face) who had apparently woken up just like her, but her eyes immediately locked onto the gloomy hoodie bastard who was embracing her cute twin sister from behind.
“What the hell do you think you’re doing to my Higan!? This calls for the death penalty!!”
“No, Renge, you need to watch out! Um, behind you!!”
“Hm?”
Confused, she turned around and saw a 5 meter beast there: the white liger☆
“Ah,
abyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”
She got up and tried to scramble away, but she tripped quite spectacularly and made a perfect hole-in-one on Shiroyama Kyousuke and Meinokawa Higan. *I see,* she thought. *So Higan woke up shortly before I did and followed the exact same path along this tricky 7th hole.*
Kyousuke lay sprawled out with a twin sister in each arm, but he focused on his business and asked Aika a question.
“A-any progress?”

“As your spiritual little sister, I’m starting to think I should reach for my bikini’s knots to emerge victorious in the battle over you, but fine. We had hits in A Block, Z Block, and P Block. I honestly think you should start with P Block since it was the most recent one, but…”
After receiving a photo of 3A from Lu Niang Lan of Illegal (in exchange for a large debt of gratitude), he had passed that on to Aika of Government (in exchange for looking after the shut-in) and she had searched for the girl using Toy Dream 35’s public crime prevention system. That had given them some general location information. She could not go around in a full-face helmet all the time and she would grow careless on occasion no matter how cautious she was.
But this was no more accurate than telling them which of the 26 blocks she had last been seen in.
In that case, they needed something more.
That was where the item bought from Lu Niang Lan came into play.
Claude Magentarain used an animal vessel. It was a giant bird of prey and its name was Ricky. They had no way of knowing how much he cared for the bird, but he would certainly be in trouble if he lost it in enemy territory. He was a summoner, so he could not use his power without a vessel.
That led to a simple answer: Edelchohilaris Disease.
Those parasites were fatal to birds of prey but had no effect on humans and their eggs had been scattered across P Block. That would ensure that Claude went running to the nearest animal hospital.
Kyousuke and Sekurtiti left Aika’s luxury apartment.
They made their way to one of the giant bridges crisscrossing between the buildings.
The Tomb Priestess was still dressed in her bandages, L-shaped transparent lace, and gold decorations, but she was also wearing her yukata since they had to take a train to P Block.
“I have heard of those. They’re called capsule toys.”
“I don’t think any kid would use that official name.”
“I-I heard they are a nightmarish trap that keeps you from ever quitting once you’ve started. Tremble tremble.”
“Maybe I should have a chat with that old man in a casual suit.”
This time, they were working with Biondetta and her white snake. Kyousuke was going to use everything available to him. He was willing to fight Claude two-against-one.
Drawing him out was one thing, but they still had no idea how powerful he was. And with the glimpses of the White Queen they were getting, it was unclear how much he could use her in an actual battle.
If possible, Kyousuke wanted to hit him with a quick attack before she showed up.
If he was alone, they could crush him two-against-one. If he had help, Biondetta could clear out the others while Kyousuke focused on Claude.
“Hee hee hee. But I see you didn’t go for three-against-one.”

“Oh, you mean those twins. They haven’t made any kind of contract with me and they won’t be at their best so soon after recovering from their defeat. Plus, Renge apparently had all of her organs taken out and put back in. I’m not foolish enough to use something with so many uncertain factors.”
“Yes, let’s go with that. Oh, Kyousuke-chan is growing up so fast.”
Kyousuke looked like he really wanted to say something, but the horned demon in an Oiran-style mini yukata only smiled and poked at his cheek with her skinny index finger.
The city was as peaceful as ever. For the Tanabata Fair, smiling families wearing yukatas and jinbei were crossing the giant bridges and using their light filtered smartphones to visit tourist locations.
Within all that, Sekurtiti sighed in exasperation.
Her eyes followed a stray cat out for a walk around its territory.
“It was very cruel of you to spread a plague through the pharaoh’s new resting place prepared by President Toydream.”
“I had to go this far to draw Claude out of hiding. …And if he’s connected to the White Queen, then this does not even approach cruel in comparison.”
If Claude had the White Queen, he might not need any other Material. But anyone could tell how dangerous it was to use that capricious queen as your primary fighting force. Any proper summoner would also want to keep a vessel handy.
“Edelchohilaris Disease is such a powerful avian illness that they planned to intentionally disseminate it to eliminate the risk of a dangerous infection carrier when there was an explosion in the population of scavenging vultures. But they couldn’t properly calculate out the influence on the environment, so the plan was shelved. And it’s a rare parasite in Japan, so not many animal hospitals keep the serum on hand. There’s only the one place in P Block.”
“So the streets are filled with eggs of a bug that causes a dangerous disease?”
“How many tens of thousands of varieties of germs with Latin names do you think are lurking in the parks everyone relaxes in? Not to mention all the intestinal bacteria in your gut. Looking into those details is a good way to inspire an obsession with cleanliness.”
“I just hope the tomb raiders are the only ones who will suffer from this plague. Like a curse brought by the pharaoh.”
It was a relatively large animal hospital known by the locals as the Menagerie Hospital. That name and its prosperity were likely due to the fact that it primarily served dangerous pets imported from overseas: ferocious beasts, venomous bugs, carnivorous fish, etc. It was a niche business that was highly skilled but served a limited demographic. The panda statue in front of the entrance seemed to be the mascot of an animal-related pharmaceutical company. Aika might have known more since she lived with that white liger.

Perhaps because it was an animal hospital, it did not have an emergency outpatient entrance like a normal hospital would. Kyousuke's group set up their position in the bushes next to the parking lot, where they could see both the front gate and the emergency exit. Since she no longer had to worry about people's eyes on her, Sekurtiti reached for her yukata's obi as she crouched down next to Kyousuke.
"…So you really are going to take it off."
"?"
The serious girl did not hesitate to reveal her bandages, Y-shaped lace cloth, and golden decorations and she tilted her head with the golden tiara on top, so reasonable Kyousuke breathed a depressed sigh.
On his other side, Biondetta was feeding pellets of food to the white snake that crawled out of her yukata's chest.
"There they are. Hmm, and no sign of putting a sniper in place. Does he not want to let any weakness show in front of his men? No, he might just be a lone wolf."
"Yeah."
They did not have to wait long.
It was Claude Magentarain and 3A.
The large man with a missing arm and an eyepatch looked like a pirate captain. The girl in a dress had a unique coloring reminiscent of a snow spirit despite it being July. They were jogging across the parking lot. And while holding a large but limp bird of prey. Kyousuke smiled while hiding behind the bushes. This man was involved with the White Queen and he was seeking the Founder's Gallery and the Natural History's missing entries, but he seemed to still have enough of a heart to care for the family pet.
For a brief moment, a past experience threatened to ensnare Kyousuke's soul.
But he shook it off. And he spoke with the cold heart of someone waiting in ambush.
"Let's get started."
The two summoners moved simultaneously. Kyousuke pulled an Incense Grenade from his pants pocket and Biondetta pulled on from between her legs in the mini-yukata. They both pulled the pin and threw it. The delay was between 3 and 5 seconds. Even if Claude noticed and tried to knock them away, one or the other would detonate before he could reach it.
But Claude reacted swiftly here. Before the two Incense Grenades could go off, he reached into his coat. He pulled out a gun that looked like an enlarged version of the flintlock guns used in the Age of Discovery. It was a single-shot grenade launcher and he did not hesitate to fire it at his own feet.
At first glance, the result might have seemed the same.
An Artificial Sacred Ground quickly formed and it contained Kyousuke, Biondetta, and Claude. But control of a mixed Artificial Sacred Ground belonged to the summoner whose Incense Grenade detonated first. So when

their footing was destroyed and they fell, if Kyousuke landed on the ground and Claude on a pillar, the next Artificial Sacred Ground would appear in relation to Claude's footing. That advantage could not be taken lightly. Claude had likely understood the situation from the moment he had pulled the launcher's trigger.
And no matter how much his bird of prey partner was suffering, it would be distanced from death while fighting as a Material. But only for that long.
Kyousuke had Sekurtiti stay by his side, Biondetta placed the white snake on the pavement after it slithered out from the chest of her Oiran-style yukata, and Claude released the weakened bird of prey into the air once more. The man used his surviving left hand to swing and open up his retractable Blood-Sign and he linked with 3A whose dress fluttered around her and displayed her slender silhouette. They held the Blood-Sign straight ahead in their three-legged race style.
"…Not bad."
"You interfered with us and didn't hesitate to steal the key we needed for the hostage exchange, so did you really think we'd let you escape unharmed? Don't screw with me, ghost. Just because things worked out in the end is no excuse. That was only how it turned out."
"Oh? So you want the Natural History's missing entries that badly? Well, I guess it is hard to fight the Queen's pull."
"You have no right to say that to me."
Both sides had pulled out their Blood-Signs. They aimed the tips at the floating White Thorns and stared at the Rose made of 216 Petals that appeared at the midpoint between them.
"I don't know what you hope to accomplish by taking advantage of the situation and gaining the Natural History's missing entries. But if it has anything to do with the White Queen, I will do whatever it takes to crush you. I'm sure I don't have to explain why to you of all people. You're the one that saved me from that hell!!"

Part 8

White lights passed through the air from 3 different directions.
With a solid sound, the three-dimensional Rose burst into countless Petals.
Those scattering lights were hit into the randomly-placed Spots.
Sekurtiti's voice ran directly in the back of Kyousuke's mind.
(It begins.)
Kyousuke had the Original Green (k). Sound Range: Middle. Cost: 1.

Biondetta had the Original Yellow (s). Sound Range: High. Cost: 1.
Their enemy Claude had the Original Green (k). Sound Range: Middle. Cost: 1.
They were all slime Materials. The very first selection was nearly random, but this was actually the ideal situation. In a 2-against-1 battle, the standard tactic was to have one person with the same rock-paper-scissors style Sound Range as the enemy and one person with the superior Sound Range. (Hm? Why did you choose different ones? It would be best for both of you to attack with his weakness.)
“There’s a reason for this.”
If they both chose the superior Sound Range, there was a chance of the enemy overturning everything by summoning a Material with a Sound Range superior to both of them. And if one of them had the superior Sound Range and one had the inferior Sound Range, the enemy could focus on the inferior one, defeat them quickly, and make a comeback in the 1-on-1 battle that remained.
Thus, the standard was superior and equal.
That was the best combination. It gave them an advantage as things were and allowed them to maintain that advantage even if the enemy shifted to another Material. It was like Kyousuke acted as a shield with his identical Sound Range while Biondetta was the attacker with her superior Sound Range.
Then their White Thorns crossed paths as they built up their Materials. Once they built up their momentum, there would be no stopping them. Claude would never find an advantage, so the pressure would bear down on him from above and crush him.
Or it should have worked that way.
However…
(…?)
Claude quickly launched several White Thorns. The white lights were fired using the three-legged-race assistance of 3A outside the protective circle, and they collided with Kyousuke and Biondetta’s White Thorns, knocking them astray. This was meant to destroy their teamwork.
However, that should have been suicide for Claude. In a 2-against-1 battle, his opponents had a total number of White Thorns twice as high as his. So if he used a single White Thorn to intercept each of theirs, he would run out first. Interfering was fine, but he would be helpless if he lost the tools he needed to build up his own Material.
And yet the situation did not tilt in either direction.
When Claude’s White Thorns collided with Kyousuke and Biondetta’s, they expelled all of their kinetic energy and came to a stop in midair. They should have disappeared then, but they remained in place.
No, wait.
“What is that!?”

“Biondetta, Claude’s Thorns are *still moving*. They’re just spinning rapidly in place!”
Kyousuke roared a warning, but 10 seconds had already passed. A new White Thorn appeared to replenish Claude’s emptied stock. He did not hesitate to fire it. The White Thorn hit the others and only Claude’s white lights bounced around the Artificial Sacred Ground and used their great numbers to steal away the Petals in no time. They were hit into the Spots.
Sekurtiti’s surprised voice rang in Kyousuke’s head.
(This is not looking good!)
When Kyousuke and Biondetta each launched a White Thorn, Claude caused a chain reaction with several to compete with their combined numbers.
Kyousuke had The Dead that Burns with a Curse (ov – ou – q – ye). Sound Range: High. Cost: 7.
Unable to maintain a human form any longer, this mass of flames burned with the curse it created itself and it constantly changed between 7 different colors. Whosoever was taken inside that mass producer of negative emotions would swell out from within until they burst.
Biondetta had the Jewel Flies that Draw out Dark Desire (iu – fc – ei – upm – np – sq). Sound Range: Middle. Cost: 13.
It was a storm of thousands and tens of thousands of flies, each of which was a beautiful and colorful jewel. That colorful monster’s light grasped and drew in its prey’s soul, brushing it aside would cover you with countless pathogens, and the victim was decorated with psychedelic mold.
Claude had the Long Red-Haired Journal that Drips with Hatred (ov – an – le – rx – n – a – b – er – ju). Sound Range: Middle. Cost: 15.
Taking the form of a giant floating book, the bizarre journal continually spat out long and sticky hair from between its pages. It was a predator that increased its page number by crushing its victims inside itself.
“Sorry, Sekurtiti. I’ll be putting a bit of a burden on you!”
(Do not worry. That is what it means to work together!)
Kyousuke’s focus on supporting Biondetta had worked against him, so he was in real trouble now. Even with the superior Sound Range, the enemy could overcome that by force when the Cost difference was at 10 or more. They were fighting on a flat parking lot, so it was difficult to pull off any tricky tactics.
“This isn’t good. …Sir!”
Biondetta made an immediate decision. She had her Material smash the ground at their feet and they all fell straight down. When their footing was destroyed, a new Artificial Sacred Ground would open where they fell. Claude had been the one to use the Incense Grenade, so the new Artificial Sacred Ground would be in reference to where he landed, but it would still help to have a new set of Roses appear.
Toy Dream 35 was a city of tall buildings rising from the ocean. Their next footing was a transformer substation more than 20 meters below. They did

not have to worry about physical injury thanks to the protective circles, but they still had to refocus their minds for the fall.
However…
(Wah!?)
Sekurtiti's voice exploded in Kyousuke's mind. Their vision had spun around. Gravity had reversed. He glanced over and saw 3A holding the Blood-Sign in one hand and using her other hand to hold the windlass pike she used as a spear. The special steel made the spear into a nice spring and she had started her fall with it stabbed into the ground. And what did that accomplish?
There were giant swings that functioned as a variant on bungie jumping. Instead of falling straight down, you passed below the bridge like a swing and moved to the other side.
This was the same.
Claude was supported by 3A and the Blood-Sign, so he swung below the broken platform instead of falling. And that allowed him to "land" upside-down on the bottom of the parking lot.
"This isn't over yet. You picked this fight, so don't be showing your backs just yet."
This was not at all the reset that Kyousuke and Biondetta had hoped for. Tossed about by the rapid gravitational change, Kyousuke was unable to land on his feet and fell onto his back. Biondetta did the same, with her black knee socks and thighs fully visible below her mini-yukata. Before he could even get up, Kyousuke thrust out his Blood-Sign, hit a White Thorn, and just barely managed to break the new mass of Roses. He avoided the fatal Cost difference of 10.
(Is this a monorail?)
Sekurtiti was right.
Kyousuke had been busy subconsciously performing complex calculations to control his White Thorns, so it took him a moment to grasp the situation. They were not just on the bottom of the destroyed parking lot platform. It was a railroad. They had fallen onto the bottom of a cargo monorail loaded with containers and tanks. It had cartoony images of Orihime and Hikoboshi drawn on it for the Tanabata Fair.
In this upside-down world, it felt like they were standing on the roof of a train as the fight resumed. As the Materials grew stronger, larger, and more powerful, each of their attacks had more weight behind them.
The metal containers were easily torn apart and stray shots caused the cylindrical tanks behind them to explode. Gravity was only reversed for the summoners and Materials, so the steel shrapnel became a storm of razor-sharp guitar picks that poured into the ocean below.
(What about the driver!?)
"Don't worry. This is a Toy Dream 35 freight train, so it's probably self-driving."
It was Claude who responded to Kyousuke's comment.

“Tch. I was hoping the explosions would cause the train to stop. No, maybe the initial destruction of the parking lot severed the control signal cables. This is the problem with self-driving trains. Or maybe this has to do with summoners and Materials not showing up on cameras and sensors when an Incense Grenade is in effect.”
“…?”
“The limit is 10 minutes, but you’re making this awfully attractive.”
Claude clicked his tongue just as the scenery changed. The sea and sky vanished. By the time Kyousuke realized they had entered a tunnel – no, a building – it was too late to do anything about it.
“The cargo terminal station? …Sir!”
Everything exploded before Biondetta could say anything.
(…!!!???)
Sekurtiti’s thoughts no longer formed words. First, the freight train lost control thanks to the exploding tanks, slammed into the terminal station, and was smashed to smithereens. Then chemicals and fire scattered in every direction, spreading the flames to the other freight trains waiting in the station. The conflagration spread in no time at all.
(Setting a fire in the pharaoh’s tomb!?)
The silver lining was that the trains were self-driving and thus unmanned. And the scorching hell could not harm the summoners thanks to the protective circles or the vessels thanks to the Materials.
The Artificial Sacred Ground was established in relation to Claude, so Kyousuke and Biondetta had to pay careful attention to what their floor would be.
“!!”
The container and tank cars weighing several tons each were blown away like paper boxes in the wind. They rolled across the station. To the summoners, even that was only a terrain effect that caused the White Thorns and Petals to bounce around wildly. The whirling flames created a mirage and blowing black smoke blinded them, but their task remained the same: move faster, more often, and stronger than their opponent.
The White Thorns that should have disappeared after being hit would instead remain in place thanks to their rapid spin, the next shot would be launched, and Claude would send a great number of Petals into the Spots all at once. The first thing Kyousuke and Biondetta had to do to combat this was to avoid any interference from Claude. No matter what anyone said, their superior numbers gave them an advantage. As long as the initial interference did not affect them, none of Claude’s unique tactics could fill that gap. They would eventually win.
Salvation and vengeance.
Their paths had split, but Kyousuke and Biondetta still worked in perfect unison. They did not act separately to surround Claude from multiple directions. Kyousuke bounced his White Thorns off of Biondetta’s and Biondetta bounced hers off of Kyousuke’s so their paths would slither

around like a living creature. They continued to escape Claude's lock as they grazed the Petals and knocked them into the Spots.
A question from Sekurtiti entered Kyousuke's head.
(Hm? What is that?)
A change soon occurred.
Of course, Kyousuke, Biondetta, and Claude's Materials were complexly changing every few seconds and the first two were slowly filling the gap by avoiding Claude's interference, but this was a different change.
(Oh, that's right.)
Sekurtiti's words continued.
(She is part of the Summoning Ceremony battle, but she is outside the protective circle. Claude's vessel is the bird of prey, not her. So…)
3A.
That small girl aimed his Blood-Sign in place of his missing right arm, but she did not receive the benefit of the protective circle. Containers and tanks were exploding within the freight terminal and the building was full of scorching flames and black smoke. True to her name, 3A was strengthened in some severe ways, but this was still too much for her to bear. She had seemed like a cold snow spirit, but now her face was covered in sweat, making her look like a hunk of ice melting on a grill.
"Nee hee☆ In that case…"
"No, Biondetta! Wait!!"
Her silver Blood-Sign doubled as a bold-action sniper rifle. Kyousuke quickly yelled at her when he saw her shifting her grip and center of gravity while launching a White Thorn.
"Claude, that girl isn't going to last long. If you put down your Blood-Sign and let yourself be defeated, we can reach an agreement. We're after the Founder's Gallery and the White Queen. We don't have anything against you!!"
"…"
The blond man's one eye wandered a little.
But not enough to make that decision.
He once more squeezed the grip near the bottom of his Blood-Sign.
"3A."
"Yes?"
"You only have to do as much as you can, but give it your all. If you can't go on, abandon me and get out of here. Even if I'm trapped in the Artificial Sacred Ground, I can destroy the ground to reset everything. Use some acrobatics to escape without setting foot on the ground below and then wait for a chance to counterattack."
"Understood."
(Kh… Even after all this, we can't stop them!?)
Shiroyama Kyousuke's internal temperature did not rise from simple anger. Instead, it dropped to icy levels.

Claude had announced he would stay true to his methods and wear down the girl's life for his own purposes. Or perhaps it was for the White Queen who held his soul and would not let go. In that case, Kyousuke would stay true to his methods too. He would save human lives. He would stop thinking about anything else.
(What are you going to do, Shiroyama Kyousuke!?)
He answered with a single word.
"Sekurtiti."
With an explosive noise, the floor between Kyousuke and Claude collapsed. But this time it was not to change their footing for a reset like when Biondetta had done it. The summoners and vessels were using the paranormal to fight, but the stage itself was part of the normal world and thus obeyed the proper laws of physics.
He wanted one thing: a lot of oxygen.
As that basic element arrived from outside, the indoor terminal's flames were activated.
They gained explosive force.
Much like a backdraft, flames and shockwaves swept across the indoor space. But it was the oxygen that mattered most. Even if it had been invited in from outside, if it was all used as fuel, the problem would be an overall dearth of oxygen.
Kyousuke was fine, Biondetta was fine, and Claude was fine.
But what about 3A who did not have a protective circle?
"Not bad for someone who acts like he's so well behaved!!"
"I prioritize human lives above all else. *Nothing else matters.* It doesn't even matter if someone collapses here as long as they can be revived later."
The snow spirit girl's head wobbled.
She slowly shook her head.
"I'm…fine."
No, she tried to shake it.
"I am…3A. I will…loyally fulfill…my chosen master's…"
But she was outdone by her own momentum and her tiny body crumpled to the side. Her index and middle fingers left the tip of the Blood-Sign.
"…"
Claude Magentarain's Blood-Sign lost control.
Only now did the eyepatch man remember something: the people who truly need help no longer have the strength to even voice the words "help me". Hadn't it been the same when he had first met 3A? An old acquaintance had changed their name to Doctor S and was working behind the scenes, so he had stopped by to greet them, found they were not in the high-rise building they used as a base, and ran into this girl who had robotically attacked him. He could have killed her if he had thrown an Incense Grenade and summoned a Material.
But he had not.

His hesitation had allowed the girl's blade to stab deep into the right arm he used to protect his vitals and he had ultimately lost his dominant arm. But in that moment, he had seen something: 3A herself had been more shocked than anyone that he had not killed her and had instead let her injure him.
When she had asked a trembling question, hadn't he given this answer?
"Of course I did. The people who truly need help no longer have the strength to even voice the words 'help me'."
The pain did not matter. The fear of losing his dominant hand had disappeared.
Why was it he had felt the need to tell her this first of all?
"I guess I'll just have to save you. Even if you can't put down that blade, I'll make sure you can at least use it for something other than killing. Oh, it isn't that hard. Thinking that's all you can do ends up restricting your possibilities and binding you. You need to reach for things that don't seem at all like your thing and you need to expand your horizons. For example… oh, I know. Why not start collecting stuffed animals or mascot characters? Try holding something other than a blade and you'll find it feels pretty nice in your hand."
(I see…)
Claude gave a self-deprecating smile as he lost the support for his Blood-Sign.
Even here, she still could not say "help me". Had she been that intent on clenching her teeth and helping Claude win after giving up her killing blade? Even after he had told her to only do as much as she could and even after he had given her the option of abandoning him, vanishing into the shadows, and polishing her assassin's blade as she waited for a chance to strike back and save him?
(That kid's still gonna take a lot of work.)
And Shiroyama Kyousuke would not hesitate against someone who was careless with human lives, no matter their reasons.
Time began to move once more.
A White Thorn ricocheted complexly around.
A Divine-class was summoned. Sound Range: Low. Cost: 6. It was a 3-headed goddess from Greek mythology and the ancestor of all witches. That goddess ruled over the moon, the night, and the underworld. Most importantly, she gave power to women and granted them the strength to protect themselves. And she bared her fangs against the enemy summoner.

Part 9

“Yes, this is the scene of the crash. I am here in front of P Block’s indoor freight monorail terminal. The monorail itself was unmanned and no one was hurt, but some of the smoke reached the adjacent passenger terminal, causing something of a commotion. It is still unknown how this largescale fire will affect the Tanabata Astronomical Observation Fair being held across Toy Dream 35, but they believe they can extinguish the fire by sunset.”

It sounded like a TV station reporter, but she did not hold a professional camera. She was probably a net reporter that used her smartphone to report on a video site. She would not be part of a reporter’s club or broadcast company, so she could only be described as a “self-styled” reporter.

Kyousuke’s group listened to her while opening the staff door and sneaking around to the back of the building. Once the protective circle reliant on the Material was gone, the summoners were normal humans who could be taken out by the fire and smoke, so nothing good would come of remaining at the scene of a fire.

They could not walk out the front entrance because they had caused the fire themselves and because they would stand out too much right now. After all, they were carrying a dazed one-armed eyepatch man (with a bird) and a snow spirit who had passed out from oxygen deprivation. Plus, they were accompanied by a girl who only wore bandages and a Y-shaped piece of lace now that she had stripped off her yukata. But the finishing blow was Biondetta who looked pure evil with the white snake wrapped around her. Not one of them was normal. They stood out far too much. Even if summoners and vessels would vanish from people’s minds once they were out of sight, they did not want to head outside when someone was waving a camera around and broadcasting it to the entire world.

The Oiran-style mini-yukata demon did not hesitate to reach for the unconscious girl’s flat chest.

“Oh, I found the Golden Master Key.”

She tossed Kyousuke the silver key with a 30-carat diamond in it. The boy caught it in one hand.

“The key and the ancient map. We’re finally back to where we started, but that means we can actually reach for the Natural History’s missing entries now.”

They felt like they had circumnavigated the globe. They stood in the exact same place, but it had taken an incredible amount of time to reach it. Azalea and Claude. Thanks to their interference, Kyousuke felt like he had gone to far too much effort. But now the path to the Founder’s Gallery and the Natural History’s missing entries was finally open.

But then Sekurtiti wrinkled her brow below her golden tiara.

“Only the key? What happened to the treasure chest?”

“Biondetta.”

“Don’t ask me. This girl’s dress is full of blades, even if it doesn’t look like it. I’m betting the steel weighs more than her entire body. But there’s nothing like what you want. What about that man? Have you tried feeling around on him?”
“This is all I found.”
Kyousuke flicked something over to Biondetta: a micro memory card a quarter the size of a stamp.
“Where was it?”
“Below his eyepatch. The format doesn’t fit my smartphone. Decrypt it for me.”
Biondetta did as she was told. Kyousuke thought about all this as he watched her stick the micro memory card into a slot on her smartphone.
“What if it’s tougher to crack than you expect?”
“We can just ask him everything we want to know, including how to get in.”
That was a trivial issue. Once someone lost the Summoning Ceremony, they could not lie, so they could be directly asked for any hidden location, safe combination, or computer password you wanted. The one exception was something with a random element such as “I stuck it in a bottle and sent it out to sea, so I don’t know where it is now”, but Kyousuke doubted the man would do anything that would prevent himself from retrieving the hints when it related to the Founder’s Gallery or the Natural History’s missing entries.
And as he went over those logical thoughts, he suddenly came to a stop in the staff hallway.
“What is it, sir?”
“Nothing.”
He wanted to deny it.
But he could not stop a certain possibility from flashing through his mind. Where had the Golden Treasure Chest gone? Hadn’t he felt this same way when dealing with Azalea? He had assumed Azalea and Claude were connected, but that had proved untrue. Could that be the case this time too? What would it mean if Claude and the White Queen were not connected here?
Hadn’t she even said it was about time she too joined the game too? And she had taken the Golden Treasure Chest so she could take part. If those two had been connected from the beginning, she would not have needed to do that. Kyousuke needed the Diamond Master Key either way, so the White Queen had not needed a new participation ticket.
It was also a mystery why Claude was seeking the Founder’s Gallery.
It had been hard to believe he was blinded by the White Queen when he shared that same past. Kyousuke had forced himself to accept that people could change so drastically.
But what if that was not the case?
He heard a light electronic beep.
“Sir.”

Biondetta shook her smartphone. She had apparently decrypted the micro memory card found behind Claude's eyepatch.
"As I expected, he was gathering information on techniques to preserve the human body and create dolls. Looks like he didn't care if it was ancient or modern or what part of the world it came from."
"But…wait. What is this?"
Pygmalion, crystal skulls, *sokushinbutsu*, Joan of Arc's heart… He had indeed been gathering information on the techniques, but the added text suggested something else entirely.
"Risk of Spreading: D. Destroying the original will suffice."
"Risk of Spreading: C. Copies have already spread. The magic cabal calling itself a publisher will need to be destroyed."
"Risk of Spreading: A. Impossible to erase. I'll have to spread mistaken traditions online to dilute it."
"Um, was he going around erasing the information on the techniques he went to so much trouble to hunt down? But why? Did he want to have the Queen all to himself???"
"If not, then this is like the definitions file for security software. He made a copy of the source information so he could identify the dangerous information still out there. Once he had determined something had all been erased, he would destroy his eyepatch to truly erase that information from the world."
"Again: why?"
Needless to say, the doll this information could create would be an artificial vessel. And if the Natural History's missing entries were incorporated into the foundational structure, it would allow the White Queen's soul to remain in this world indefinitely.
He would take that from humankind.
He would erase it from the world.
"Could it be…?"
"?"
"Did I have it backwards? Claude wasn't fighting to summon the White Queen. Was he erasing any method of summoning her to indirectly prevent her from appearing here…no, to shut her out of this world?"
It was unknown if that Queen would give up on this world…no, on Shiroyama Kyousuke if her existing link to it were broken. She could twist the laws of the world as she saw fit, so it was entirely possible she could create completely new rules and definitions on the same level as the 3rd Summoning Ceremony discovered in 1999.
In fact, crushing the possibilities of the Summoning Ceremony could easily lead to throwing out any method or possibility of opposing the White Queen. It was dangerous, but it was still a double edged sword. Breaking it in order to not cut yourself would also rob you of the means to protect yourself.
But.
What had this incident looked like to Claude Magentarain?

Azalea Magentarain and Shiroyama Kyousuke.
Two children with past connections to him had been fighting (and one side had even been willing to kill) over the Founder's Gallery and the Natural History's missing entries.
What if he had only been trying to confiscate that?
What if he had not been an enemy?
Kyousuke heard a footstep.
It came from directly behind him.
His heart seemed to shrink inside his chest. He recalled the fear of the White Queen's arrival after Azalea's defeat. And she had taken everything from him. But fear was the seed of action for a summoner. He needed to absorb it and rejoice in finding a new method. So he did not panic. Even if he found pure white evil when he turned around, he would find a way out of here. He would get through this.
He turned around with that in mind.
But what he found there was far too unexpected.
"Wha-…?"
Biondetta and Sekurtiti may not have understood his surprise. After all, most people had only ever heard the legends and few had actually seen this individual.
Who was working with the White Queen?
This was the answer.
"How are…you alive?"
Kyousuke's dazed comment had an entirely different nuance than when he had encountered Claude.
The other person approached.
The silhouette of a long Blood-Sign rested on his shoulder and a sensually beautiful woman stood by his side as a vessel.
A woman Kyousuke knew very well used to be the one standing there.
She had been kept in a large animal cage and treated like a mere object.
After the Queen's Miniature Garden, this man had taken over Government and brought the entire organization together as a tyrannical king. As the strongest and cruelest summoner, he had transformed the meaning of the word "justice" to his own liking. He had traversed the three major powers, devoured countless Awards, and finally reached the 1000 Award barrier.
But just before moving to the other side, that dream had supposedly been extinguished when a woman had stabbed him in the back.
And Shiroyama Kyousuke shouted his name.
"Elvast Toydream… The Thousand Eater!?"
That great evil responded by opening his mouth just once.
He did not say much.
"I will end this in 1 second."

Part 10

And.
A woman sat at the counter of a used tool shop in C Block's Chinatown.
Her alluring body was contained in a modified China dress and she had supposedly cast aside her life as a vessel.
Lu Niang Lan felt a mysterious shiver run down her spine.

Facts

- The White Queen stole the Golden Treasure Chest and left.
- The Saint is a holy woman and a witch who readily changes between master and servant. Meanwhile, her vessel boy does not want anything extreme and only wants to be with that woman.
- The Saint and the remnants of Bridesmaid were destroyed when they attacked Claude. That has at least eliminated any worshipers capable of activity inside Toy Dream 35.
- Claude was gathering items related to doll creation and human preservation, such as the Founder's Gallery and the Natural History's missing entries, because he wanted to fully sever the link between worlds and protect this world from anyone summoning an irregularity like the White Queen. That is why he worked to stop the deadly battle between Azalea and Kyousuke.
- The person who was actually working with the White Queen was Elvast Toydream. He was once the ruler of Government and he was supposed killed by Lu Niang Lan's betrayal just after reaching Award 1000.

Notes

- ↑**Sokushinbutsu**''' is the act of self mummification practiced by Buddhists monks.

Stage 04: The Strongest Summoner is Infatuated with the World of Man

“Ahh, ahh. This is why I hate myself…”
“No matter what, I always end up relying on the White Queen in the end.”
(Stage 04 Open 07/07 16:30)
The Strongest Summoner is Infatuated with the World of Man

Part 1

Shiroyama Kyousuke’s mind was wrapped in something soft and fluffy. It was incredibly smooth, elastic, warm, and nice smelling. It was so comfortable he was tempted to stay there forever. But at the same time, that comfort seemed to dangerously guide him away from thinking about the future. Yes, it was like eating a large piece of butter without giving any thought to your health.
And he heard a voice from somewhere.
Hug☆ My, my. Brother, you’re so single-mindedly focused on clinging to me like a baby. Hee hee hee. Here, you can suck at my fingertip. Ah ha ha! All I did was put some baby food on my finger, but look at you go, brother!! Loooook, look, look. There is plenty more where that came from, so there’s no hurry. Hee hee hee. Oh, it’s such a shame that this paradise only lasts 24 hours… Where should I put the baby food this time? My toes? Or my navel? Hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee.
“Ugwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

Biondetta was next to him in her yukata and she was shaking her aching head.
And she spoke.
“4:30 PM on July 7… That means it’s been more than a full day, sir.”
It was obvious what that meant.
They had lost to Elvast Toydream after his sudden appearance. A 24 hour gap had followed. What had happened to Shiroyama Kyousuke while he could not resist any external stimuli?
As he silently wept, his kind big sister hugged him to the chest of her Oiran-style mini-yukata.
“Oh, ohhhhhhh, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh….”
“There, there. That must have been a frightening ordeal. 24 hours in front of the White Queen while entirely helpless? Hard to imagine anything more horrifying. Let’s hold off on any work for today and let your big sister comfort you.”
His free will had died.
Kyousuke had become pure white ash as he lay on the bed letting Biondetta do whatever she wanted, but then he heard a strange voice from the side.
“Hee, hee hee hee. Hee hee hee hee hee. Claude…that flawless brother is right here! And I can play with him while he opens his mouth like a defenseless baby bird. Here you go. Say ‘ah’. Say ‘ahhhhh’☆”
“You mustn’t, milady. I understand that you are happy, but you have already given him far too much to eat. Ho ho. But it is surprising to see that naughty boy so obedient.”
“Old man, Azalea might stop feeding him if you stopped passing her more Italian ham and melon. Sigh.”
The zombie-like state after losing lasted “more than 24 hours”. In other words, it was not a set length and there were individual differences. That man was apparently still dreaming.
Kyousuke once more began trembling like a phone on vibrate.
He was probably imagining himself in a similar position.
“Honestly, no matter where you look in here, it’s only going to make things worse. Come on, *Kyousuke-chan*, come with your big sister. Let’s go somewhere less scary. I’ll treat you well.”
Kyousuke’s kind big sister led him to the roof of the apartment. The green garden there was wrapped in orange light. Biondetta spotted a beach chair and parasol that Aika had likely placed there for herself and she walked over while guiding Kyousuke, who had lost his way in life.
As he sat in the beach chair with her rubbing his head and gently holding him in her arms, Kyousuke tried to recall what had happened, but he had trouble.
“You don’t need to force open your wounds now. You should drink something sweet to calm yourself, Kyousuke-chan.”

He accepted the drink sitting on the side table and was surprisingly willing to put the straw in his mouth.
And he began choking on the first sip.
“Bwah!! God, that’s sweet!!”
“Hee hee. How did you like your big sister’s special honey maple condensed milk? I’m glad to see you have a bit more energy now.”
Biondetta took the glass from Kyousuke, kept a hand around his arm, and leaned to the side. They lay down next to one another on the beach chair.
He realized that they had shared the sunset from an elevated location in the past too.
He was reminded of that memory from the Queen’s Miniature Garden when everyone had been happy.
Since her drink had been on the side table, Biondetta must have woken up before him, noticed the situation, and prepared for exactly this.
After pouring a great number of antibiotics into her mouth and washing them down with a sip from the straw, Biondetta held her traumatized little brother’s head with one arm and whispered into his ear.
“You don’t need to rip off the scab all at once, Kyousuke-chan. Take it as slow as you need, okay? You can do that, right?”
“Yes…”
His mind was still a chaotic mess.
He could not think straight at all, so he would have to gradually unknot his mind by untangling the many threads one at a time.
(Government Award 1000…Elvast Toydream.)
He tried to remember, but his mind rejected it.
Nevertheless, he forced his memories open and continued onward.
What he found was devastating.
Was that man skilled in his control of the White Thorns? Had he broken out of the rock-paper-scissors arrangement between Materials? Had he done a brilliant job of understanding the terrain and incorporating it into his tactics? No, this was on an entirely different level.
It was just one attack.
The very first shot.
It was that first move that shattered the three-dimensional rose and sent the countless Petals into the Spots. There was enough of a random element there that every summoner could only secure one of the Cost 1 slimes of the Original Series. No one could break that rule.
And that was why it had caught Kyousuke entirely off guard.
With that very first shot, the White Queen had appeared.
Now, it was true that hole-in-one of a miracle was technically possible. To reach an Unexplored-class, a summoner normally had to summon 100 Regulation-classes and 50 Divine-classes. The White Queen was the peak of the peak, so the summoner would have to climb to even greater heights even after reaching the Unexplored-class. But there was a way to directly summon her. If the summoner hit the Petals into the Spots in the precise

order that spelled out her name, they could skip past that cumbersome process and summon an Unexplored-class.
But pulling off that theoretical possibility in combat was very nearly impossible.
And it would be even more impossible on the first hit which was mostly random.
How could someone even do that on purpose?
Did that man simply wield the strongest luck?
Or…
(Whatever might happen, the battle is over once the White Queen shows up. If he can do that with his very first move, there's no way to fight him. No matter what summoner challenges him…no, even if all 7 billion people on this planet faced him with Blood-Signs in hand, can that predator ignore them all and devour them?)
"Bu."
"Bu?"
"Buonbetta, were *the rest of you* okay?"
Kyousuke's voice was a bit muffled because his face was still buried in her large chest. The yukata demon looked surprised as she lay on the rooftop beach chair and placed her slender chin on his head.
"It seems we were completely fine. Of course, my memories are a bit of a mess since I also lost, but it seems the Meinokawa Sisters collected us shortly afterwards. That person who attacked us was a man, wasn't he? He could have ordered me to do anything, so that could have easily gone in a much sleazier direction."
"…?"
A question finally stopped his mind from falling into the abyss of despair. He grabbed Biondetta's shoulders and pushed himself away from her.
"Renge and Higan did?"
"If what you said is accurate, then that man was the Award 1000 who has a history in all three major powers. I seriously doubt some girls in the 300s could have done anything against him."
"Oh, right. What happened to Sekurtiti?"
"She was also entirely unharmed. She wasn't taken away either. Of course, if he was after the ancient map, he might have only needed to snap a photo of her back."
"…"
"Also, there was no sign of the Diamond Master Key. It isn't too surprising it was taken away since you were holding it in your hand, but…um, does that mean this Elvast person is after the Founder's Gallery as well? The Queen has apparently been wandering around too, so could they be after the Natural History's missing entries?"
If so, this made no sense.
Kyousuke knew the White Queen was fixated *only* on him, but what about Elvast Toydream? It was true a photo of Sekurtiti's back would suffice, but

why did that man have to worry about her safety? And what was he trying to do by summoning the White Queen? He could summon the Queen in a single move even without creating a bizarre doll using the Natural History's missing entries.
(Does he want to solidify the foundation of his tactics by holding onto the White Queen through multiple methods? No, I can't imagine how he would be afraid of failure.)
And even if that was not his main goal, that man was true to his desires, so why had he not made any kind of "detour"? Biondetta, Sekurtiti, and even 3A had been there. That man had readily restricted his former vessel woman by force and kept her in a cage like an animal, so why would he put on the brakes like a gentleman now?
"…Wait."
"Sir?"
Kyousuke felt a cold weight in the pit of his stomach.
This answer was something only someone who had seen that legend for themselves would reach. Only someone who had experienced firsthand what kind of man Elvast Toydream was. That man felt it was only natural he would rule over all 7 billion on the planet, but he trusted no one and got close to no one. Only a few people knew the truth of that man. And Kyousuke knew one other person who would have reached that answer.
"Biondetta, where is she? Where is Lu-san!?"
"Hm? Come to think of it, I haven't seen her. But this isn't her home, so it's not like she's here 24/7."
"Dammit!!"
Kyousuke reached into his pocket and pulled out his smartphone. He did not have time to wait for an email response, so he made a call. There was no sign of the woman answering.
He stepped down from the beach chair and Biondetta supported him while asking a question.
"What do you think you're doing?"
"Elvast Toydream was only after one thing from the beginning. Just like the Queen with me, only one person in this world can satisfy his selfishness. He tried to find a replacement, but no one else could quench that monster's thirst. That's why he overlooked the rest of you even though you were entirely defenseless. That's all there is to it. It was that simple. …Because he is a 'king' who holds everything in his hand, he can't invite in someone else so easily. That's how exceptional a person a vessel is to him."
His Repliglass Blood-Sign and hairspray-sized Incense Grenade should have been the ultimate weapons for a summoner, but they felt hopelessly insufficient now.
But he had to continue on regardless.
"Lu Niang Lan was the one and only person accepted by that 'king' of the world who had stolen the sword of justice and the shield of order. He was

cast down into the depths of hell and somehow managed to crawl back out, but he's still focused on *that*!?"

Part 2

As evening turned to night, C Block's Chinatown was filled with metal containers of various sizes. All of them were modules full of dozens or hundreds of fireworks. The hydraulic cylinders attached to a rotating base would adjust the angle and electric fuses would synch multiple containers to fire tens of thousands of fireworks per minute into the night sky. The modules were reminiscent of military rocket and missile systems.

The people living there were focused more on the exciting fireworks festival after the ban on light was lifted than they were on the calm Tanabata Astronomical Observation Fair. They preferred bright lights and loud noises, so while the rest of Toy Dream 35 was enjoying the event, this area was full of a strangely heated excitement much like the preparations for a cultural festival.

A man walked through that atmosphere with an icy aura of absolute zero. Elvast Toydream. That legend had a tall beauty walking by his side and he was best described as "rusty". While Claude Magentarain had been full of life even with an arm and eye missing, this man's whole body was dull and lifeless. The long hair he had forgotten to comb was graying in places and the rest of it had lost its shine. His stubbly face and muscular body were decaying from alcohol and cigarettes and old scars were visible all over him. He wore a chic jacket that would have cost as much as a luxury car, but would anyone buy it for its original price now? It had countless blade cuts and bullet holes and dark red stains stood out in places.

But most noticeable of all were his eyes.

They contained the unique light of a killer, but there was more than that there. No matter how many cruel and dehumanizing acts someone carried out, even if they took part in a war and committed mass slaughters, they could not reach this level. Those icy eyes made one think he had to have killed a god or a demon to develop them.

There were multiple sides to the human species, but he seemed to be made exclusively from the predator side. He destroyed and did nothing else. Just as a fool who tried to harness the power of a black hole or the Big Bang would destroy themselves along with many others, no one could control this man.

He had not risen to the top of Government because everyone had wanted him there. No one had been able to stop him. It was because no one had been able to drag him down from his throne that he had been able to use the name of justice. He had enough power to singlehandedly clash with the rest of humankind.
So he did not call ahead for an appointment or even knock before entering. Elvast silently stopped in front of a used tool shop and kicked down the door.
“!?”
The modified China dress beauty inside was initially shocked by the barbaric action, but when she saw the offender’s face, she felt something squeezing her heart. She half got up from the counter and then froze in a pose that actually put a greater burden on all of her body’s muscles. Even the diaphragm in charge of her breathing stopped.
“Ah…kah…”
The predator did not care in the slightest.
Her eyes widened past their limit, a clear liquid pooled at the corners of her eyes, and her alluring lips trembled unnaturally without uttering a peep.
But the stubbly man ignored it all as he spoke to her.
“It has been too long.”
“Ahhhh

in a smokescreen, if he was an Award 1000 monster, or if he was a ghost returned from the depths of hell. She did not let him guard with his arms, she wrapped the thick rope around his neck, and she tugged him toward her.
The modified China dress beauty used enough force to snap a tree trunk as thick around as her own waist.
But…
“Wha-…!?”
The one who was tugged forward was Lu Niang Lan herself.
The man had not moved a step the entire time. With more surprise than despair on her face, the Perfect Dragon watched her own smokescreen gradually clear.
It was not just that his neck had not snapped.
He had not shed a single drop of blood. Even if most of them had been to deter him from action, just how many hidden weapons had she sent his way? Each and every one of them had contained enough force to slay the average summoner or vessel before they could move a finger. Even if they had desperately guarded themselves with a bulletproof shield, the attacks had delivered enough weight to snap their arms. And yet the monster named Elvast had no apparent weapons and had not taken any sort of defensive stance. His hands were casually stuck in his pockets, several ropes were wrapped around his neck, and his face only contained a look of pity.
“What’s the matter? Are you still not done?”
She had no words.
The depths of her mind grew red hot and no words were forthcoming. Or so she wanted to believe. But she was actually overcome by a hopeless chill. And it was her heart that froze, not her mind.
“You could have acquired the title of strongest by doing nothing. By staying with me. But you instead chose to return to the wild by stabbing me in the back in the moment I achieved Award 1000. I thought you had acquired a wonderful power that not even I could duplicate…but it seems I was wrong.”
“Ah. Ahh.”
“Just to be clear, this visit is not fueled by vengeance. I was honestly impressed with you. Back then at that moment, it did not actually matter much that I had my back to you. The mere fact that you could maintain a desire to attack me, Elvast Toydream, after I had reached Award 1000, long enough to carry out said attack was truly admirable. After all, a normal person ends up like *this* the moment they are exposed to a hint of my power.”
Elvast reached out to the side.
But not toward Lu Niang Lan. If he had, she would already have gone insane.

He instead grabbed the head of his beautiful vessel. She was a tall and sensual woman in her early twenties. She had long wavy blonde hair and white skin. What she wore had likely been a full-body riding suit at some point, but it was barely recognizable now. After being exposed to countless thorough and intense burdens, more of it was torn than not. She might as well have been wearing leather belts over an otherwise naked body.
Lu Niang Lan recalled the life she had once lived.
She had lived in an animal cage and viewed the outside world through dark, lifeless eyes.
In all likelihood, the only difference between Lu Niang Lan and this unknown vessel was whether they had rebelled against or accepted those circumstances. It was hard to believe, but that woman's eyes did not contain fear or ecstasy. They contained an almost naïve longing that would have looked more at home in a much younger girl. It was like she was proud of this opportunity to be a part, however small, of a heroic legend.
And that legend let go of her.
Reluctant to let the man's fingertips go, the vessel…no, the sacrifice's eyes pursued them, but she did not speak a single word of complaint. She had been completely corrupted.
Elvast gave her a horribly disinterested look.
"So I simply wished to see how far you had honed your strength ever since breaking your bonds to a legend and gaining your freedom."
Lu Niang Lan's slender fingertips trembled. Her entire body quavered. Her skilled hands, lithe body, and sharp thoughts were all part of her deadly skill, but she gave up on all of them. The core of her being begged her not to: don't break your fangs and don't hand over your claws. If she lost those, she would fall. The hunter would become the hunted and she would be unilaterally feasted upon, squeezed dry, and have every last drop of marrow extracted from her bones. She would fall so completely that she could never escape again.
"If you insist, I will give you one last chance."
That legend was entirely unilateral.
He was not the type to have any concern for others. He made a proclamation as the tyrant who had created history while assuming the world would change for him.
"I will give you a chance to redo it all from the beginning. I am not ordering you to become my vessel. Feel despair once more and stab me. That is the compassion I am showing you."
It was over.
This was checkmate.
She felt dizzy. A pressure from the past began to crush her mind. She had to repeat that one-in-a-million if not one-in-a-billion miracle? She could not. It was simply not possible. Did he have any idea how many people, things, money, information, and luck had been on her side at the time? If all of that had failed to break down the wall known as Elvast Toydream, there was no

hope. She could only imagine living the life of a self-righting doll where she attacked but was knocked away and got up but was kicked back down.
As her vision grew dark due to lack of oxygen, her utter despair may have made her hallucinate.
She suddenly saw someone else walk in through the broken door.
“Oh, dear. I’m not about to take issue with someone else’s methods, but aren’t you putting too much pressure on her all at once? Go too far and people will lock the door to their heart and shut out the reality in front of their eyes. If you want them to maintain their ability to feel pain while you provide the greatest agony, you have to be more careful than that.”
She saw flowing silver twintails, a wedding dress elegantly cut down to size, and some silver armor added in places. It was the strongest of the strongest.
The White Queen.
“H-how?” The modified China dress beauty moved her pale lips to force out he words. “Kyousuke-chan and the others said they hadn’t located the Founder’s Gallery yet, so the Natural History’s missing entries shouldn’t have been found yet…”
The two did not respond.
The strongest human casually spoke to the strongest oddity.
“You? You aren’t obligated to assist me this far.”
“No, I’m not. But I feel like thanking you for giving me 24 hours with my beloved brother. This body and power supported by the Natural History’s missing entries are fragile, but the feeling in the fingertips is not bad at all. Please accept this reward. I am willing to show some flexibility concerning what it is you want.”
Lu Niang Lan’s head wobbled.
This time. This time it was truly over. The monster named Elvast Toydream was bad enough, but he had the White Queen on his side as well. She had her full power, she was not trapped in the Artificial Sacred Ground, and she was not restricted to 10 minutes. It was like playing a game of shogi with only a king and having every other piece targeting you. What good was any attempt she might make?
“Hm.”
Elvast slowly breathed out as he looked at Lu Niang Lan’s face.
Immediately afterwards, his arm pierced the White Queen’s chest.
Time stopped.
Lu Niang Lan was supposed to be his enemy, but even she could not understand what had just happened.
The White Queen was dead.
And in a single blow from a flesh-and-blood arm that had not even summoned a Material.
“Oh, dear.”
The Queen did not seem to be in any pain, but she did look somewhat surprised.

She tilted her head before being caught in a belated wave of destruction. Her smooth and seductive form lost all of its lifelike texture. Like a possessing spirit had left her, she became a mere doll with ball joints. When Elvast lightly swung the arm still piercing its hard chest, all of the joints fell apart and the pieces scattered across the floor. Stamp-sized pieces of paper spilled from the wound. They seemed to be old parchment or something similar. An oddly pleasant sound much like that of someone bowling a strike rang in Lu Niang Lan's ears.
"Do not let this bind you, Niang Lan."
"…"
"No matter how much this might copy the appearance, it holds less than 1% of her total power. It is inferior even to the Blood-Sign method. What value is there in a miracle that can be pierced by a human hand?"
That was nonsense.
Even if it was only the tip of her fingernail or a single hair, the Queen was still the Queen.
The Unexplored-class lurked beyond even the gods of legend and she was the peak of the peak there.
And a human had infiltrated that divine territory and killed her?
He did not brag about it. This was not the end result of a great struggle toward his life's greatest accomplishment. He had done it casually, like it was nothing. That was the peak of Government, Elvast Toydream.
"You…"
"Hm?"
"But the Queen…"
"Are you asking how I did it? Or why I did it?" Elvast sounded exasperated. "How is simple. You seem to think that the knowledge sleeping in the Founder's Gallery can be of some use, but that is no more than the result of my bloodline's obsession with collecting. How can you be sure I did not use Toy Dream's money and power for a similar 'hobby' of my own? Stop trembling, unnumbered one. That was the product of a mere hobby. But that is not where my skills lie, so it was not all that well made. Use the original gallery and you could probably create something a little better."
This was not Guard of Honor whose worship of the Queen would have filled the world with Materials.
This was not Telomere's End whose deathless world would have destroyed the order of society.
This was not Liar Cat who would burn down everything for a single revenge.
"Why?"
"?"
"Why now…?"
"Who knows. I certainly don't. I looked to the stars and was reminded of your face. If I had to give an answer, this is the best I can do."
There had been no master plan here.

“*Perhaps it was because this is Tanabata, when dreams come true.* Isn’t that enough for this? Isn’t that enough of an impetus for the world to move?”
There was no connection to Azalea and The Saint of Bridesmaid or to Claude Magentarain’s interference. He had not been taking advantage of the chaos. His mere presence in this world was a crisis for all of humanity. If the world could continue behaving logically as if nothing had happened, it would only be a fluke.
Just as the Queen had bent history to her will, a single step by that powerful man could alter the world of man.
“Then…”
“You want to know the reason why? You really have to ask? You, who have observed the man named Elvast Toydream more closely than anyone?”
“…”
“I wish to break these bonds. These bonds of my legend, of being the strongest. But a doll of that level isn’t enough. That was far too convenient for me, so it failed to function as my natural enemy. The most it could be was a sparring opponent or a tsumeshogi program. It is true I wanted to take a peek at the original gallery to check the Natural History’s missing entries. I wanted to improve the accuracy of my doll. I wanted a more worthy practice opponent.”
Lu Niang Lan searched through her past.
And she came up emptyhanded. She found no information that helped her understand what was in his heart or how to escape this situation.
“But enough about me.”
“Kh.”
She was out of ammo for buying time.
All hope was lost. She tried to move back on trembling legs. This was clearly not the act of Illegal’s hidden blade who could make the Summoning Ceremony industry tremble in fear. She lost control and a tremor spread across her entire body, her thighs naturally turned inward despite how illogical and inefficient that was, and her eyes widened with the fear of prey about to be eaten.
Unsurprisingly, she did not make it even a single step.
Her heel caught on something and she fell pathetically onto her butt. She had tripped over what had once been the regal White Queen. It was one of the pieces scattered across the floor. As soon as she realized she was the same, Lu Niang Lan lost even the power to push herself up from the floor.
The doll’s fate would be her own.
This man had control of her every action and even held her life in his hands. But this was not a strict guillotine execution. He was acting on a whim, but his absoluteness would not be swayed. This had to be the feeling of a hostage with a gun held to their forehead.
And the trigger that was his tongue moved to fire the bullets that were his words.

“Come with me, Niang Lan.”
Once they were fired, silence was not an option.
Yes or no? If she made the wrong choice, she too would be scattered across the floor.
“Let us take that fattened body and rusted soul and hone them anew.”
There was no escape.
As Lu Niang Lan trembled and looked up at the man, she chose…

Part 3

The action Shiroyama Kyousuke took in that instant was a simple one.
He fired a bazooka toward the used tool shop.
Lu Niang Lan herself was his usual source for that sort of heavy weaponry, but she was not his only option. For example, he could rely on Biondetta who had a bolt-action sniper rifle built into her Blood-Sign.
Explosive flames and a shockwave blew away the shop’s wall.
Even from a distance, the blast was powerful enough to toss Kyousuke’s hair and flip up the hem of Biondetta’s yukata.
He had not had time to worry about who was inside or if Lu Niang Lan herself would be caught in the blast. If this was really Elvast Toydream he was up against, not even a portable nuclear rocket would be enough.
Kyousuke tossed aside the empty launch tube and ran toward the shop that was starting to partially collapse. He did not need to bring Sekurtiti with him as his vessel. Once the Incense Grenade detonated, the summoner and vessel would be drawn to the same place.
So he simply gave a yell.
“Come here!! Lu-san!!”
Something flashed beyond the smokescreen.
He thought it was some kind of projectile and pulled the Repliglass Blood-Sign from his back, but the blow that struck it was powerful enough to nearly shatter his wrist. He just barely managed to deflect the first hit and somehow managed to avoid the second because Biondetta stuck her silver Blood-Sign in from the side. But that was enough for her weapon to break like it was made of plastic. She could no longer participate in a battle using the Summoning Ceremony. She grabbed the two halves in her hands and wielded them like twin blunt weapons to support Kyousuke.
Only after the two of them deflected a few more of the deadly projectiles could he identity one of them that shot skyward and lost its speed. It looked like a sharply pointed ceramic shard.

(Are they pieces of a broken doll!?)
This was not a legendary weapon that only an expert could wield. He could not say what this doll had originally been. He recalled that this tyrant, the uncontrollable Government Award 1000, had been the type of person who rejoiced in destroying his own accomplishments.
But there was no time for fear.
Kyousuke gave Biondetta a look and the Oiran-style mini-yukata demon moved away while her boots sounded on the ground. At the same time, Kyousuke gave up on defense. He maintained his momentum from running full speed ahead and slid across the ground. Several shard bullets passed by overhead as he dove through the large hole in the wall and into the dust-filled shop.
By happenstance, he ended up sliding between the legs of a woman in the tatters of what had once been a riding suit.
Seeing the Thousand Eater swing up his arm with enough force to sever that woman's thighs, Kyousuke thrust his Blood-Sign forward as he slid. He slightly diverted the man's fingers, but his own Blood-Sign was knocked away, sending him rolling along the floor.
After narrowly avoiding death again and again, he finally reached Lu Niang Lan.
"Kyousuke…-chan…?"
Still sitting on the floor, the modified China dress beauty spoke his name in a daze, but they did not have time for that. With his momentum intact, he grabbed Lu Niang Lan's hips with both arms and pushed her down. He then raised his voice.
"Biondetta!!"
Another explosion came from outside.
Rubble and dust filled the shop and flowed over Kyousuke and Lu Niang Lan's heads as they lay down on the floor. Elvast's unknown (and possibly truly nameless) vessel in the tattered riding suit was still standing, but Kyousuke seriously doubted this was enough to defeat them. He doubted they had even braced against the impact of the first bazooka blast. She was overshadowed by Elvast, but the blonde vessel was a monster herself.
He got a fresh start while holding Lu Niang Lan and crouched low.
As the doll's nails, eyeballs, and other parts tore through the smokescreen as countless sharp bullets, Kyousuke ran just a few meters through that hell to roll out the back door. It was all a mess. So many factors were outside his calculations that he was amazed he was still in one piece.
Biondetta softly caught both their body weights on her large breasts and then dragged them out through a large hole in the wall.
Sekurtiti was waiting there with her.
"Sir, do you have your Blood-Sign and Incense Grenade? Do you still have all your limbs? Are you strong enough for a Summoning Ceremony battle!?"
"I've got everything I need. More importantly, take Lu-san and get out of here. Sekurtiti and I will finish off Elvast."

He heard strange explosive sounds from all around. He had fired that initial bazooka blast and then Biondetta had blown up this wall. Sparks were raining down everywhere and igniting the container modules full of fireworks. This could easily develop into a great conflagration that enveloped the whole Chinatown.
“Shiroyama Kyousuke. I have a suggestion.”
“What is it?”
But even in that extreme environment, Sekurtiti crouched down in her bandages, tiara, and Y-shaped lace to speak calmly.
“Cancel your contract with me and bind a new one with that woman. If you do not, there will truly be no helping her.”
He had not expected that suggestion.
It was true Sekurtiti had no reason to get directly involved in this. Lu Niang Lan was much more deeply connected.
But could this modified China dress beauty do that? Could she make that choice? Her extreme skill with martial arts and hidden weapons was the result of her firm rejection of entrusting herself to the Summoning Ceremony for life as a vessel. Could he really make her break that conviction?
“You are looking at this wrong, Shiroyama Kyousuke.”
But Sekurtiti spoke up to correct a fundamental mistake.
“The very fact that she is firmly rejecting that life is a sign that she is refusing to face her past and continues to be bound by it. If she had truly been freed from those bonds, then she would not care one way or the other. The firmness of her rejection is equivalent to the strength of those bonds, so she has yet to conquer them. And this is probably her last chance to free herself. No matter how it happens, she will never break free if she misses this opportunity. Even if Elvast dies today, his ghost will continue to haunt her heart. I do not want to create that kind of fruitless grudge in the pharaoh’s tomb. This city should be where the pharaoh’s remains sleep peacefully as they await the return of his soul, not a haunted place where people fear a curse.”
Government Award 1000.
This required the defeat of Elvast Toydream, a man who became a living legend.
But not by Shiroyama Kyousuke. Lu Niang Lan had to defeat him herself to cleanse her of her past.
“Can you do it, Lu-san?”
“…”
“Can you break your own rules to overcome your past!? Can you!?”
For a while, she did not answer.
No, perhaps it was simply that difficult for her trembling and charming lips to form the words. That was how close to breaking she was.
“I…”
But she managed.

She sat on the ground, crumpled up her face, and showed no sign of her usually confident and alluring appearance. She was worn down, beaten, and battered.
Even so, that woman who had again had everything taken from her spoke the words.
“I want to move on.”
It was almost like her feelings were a damaged record that kept repeating as the needle skipped.
“I don’t want to be bound by the past. I want to walk forward on my own feet. I don’t want to be imprisoned by anything. I don’t want to be overwhelmed by a life where I thought I had escaped but only get attacked from behind.”
But there was something she had never lost.
No matter how much she was hurt or how much she suffered, this would not be lost as long as the record itself did not shatter.
It would never be lost.

“It didn’t have to be Illegal! I just wanted to escape Government!! The underworld wasn’t particularly comfortable. I didn’t want to turn my back on justice! But as long as it let me shake off that awful shadow! I just wanted to leave that cage. I wanted to be freed from that oppression. I wanted to spread my arms and bathe in the sun without having to ask anyone’s permission!! So!!”
He had thought he understood her.
But he had not.
Because now Shiroyama Kyousuke came in contact with her truly exposed soul.
“*Help me*, Kyousuke-chan. I never want to go back there!! I want to seal up that hell here and now. I want to say goodbye to my past and continue on to the future! So *help meeee

Part 4

Just as Biondetta swiftly left the scene with Sekurtiti, a 20 meter Artificial Sacred Ground surrounded the back alley and the half-destroyed shop. Enemy and ally faced each other with the three-dimensional red Rose floating between them.
Government Award 1000, Thousand Eater.
Elvast Toydream and the nameless beauty.
The supreme man lightly stepped on his own shadow and something shot up vertically. It was a reddish-brown mass of rust. But when he casually caught it and tossed it against the wall, the rust peeled away from the surface. This revealed a glittering gold Blood-Sign that gave off a bright light.
As far as pure skill as a summoner went, he was probably history's strongest. A single hit to the mostly random Rose and he could accurately knock the exact sequence of letters into the Spots needed to summon the White Queen and declare checkmate with his very first move. If he could do that with 100% accuracy, no summoner could hope to challenge him. It was like working to gather a decent hand while your opponent was always dealt a royal flush. No amount of effort or even cheating could defeat someone who possessed such incredible luck.
But.
Just as two White Thorns shattered the Rose, something happened.
Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say something *did not* happen.
The legend had made his first shot, but the White Queen was not summoned. Petals fell into the Spots like normal and the two vessels transformed into the Original Series slimes like normal.
Because she had seen that hopeless legend from closer than anyone, Lu Niang Lan voiced her surprise directly in Kyousuke's brain.
(What…?)
"Oh?"
Elvast himself sounded amused.
He sounded like someone who had cast their fishing rod without expecting anything but then felt a small fish biting.
"There are two ways of getting past your first-move win. The first is to hit and break the Rose before you can, but I'm sure you have some simple countermeasures for that one."
Kyousuke was not speaking up just because he liked to explain.
By revealing and crushing his opponent's methods, he could reduce the man's charisma at least a little. Shiroyama Kyousuke was familiar with this man's legend. And he had lost to the man once already. If he did not do this,

his legs would give out. The boy would utterly fail to reach the battered image of the strongest he wanted to be.
“And your first-move win looks like it leaves a lot to chance, but that isn’t accurate. The Rose is formed by a three-dimensional arrangement of the 6 x 6 x 6 = 216 Petals. The arrangement of those letters and the location of the Spots seem random, so calculating out where to send your White Thorn might seem pointless, but that isn’t true. …The letter arrangement and Spot locations are based on the terrain. So if you accurately search out all the terrain conditions in advance, you can calculate out those seemingly random factors. And that leads to a nightmarish attack that summons the Queen in a single move!”
Of course, knowing how it worked was not enough to actually pull it off. Even Kyousuke had merely been able to guess that it might be possible to calculate that out, but he had not actually reached the level of making those calculations. No, they were no longer calculations. This man had reached Award 1000, so it was a miracle only possible for him. It was a complex combination of natural intuition and vast experience, like a fortuneteller outdoing a weather satellite’s forecasts just by reading the wind and looking at the shapes of the clouds.
But interfering with that method was much easier.
Everything he had needed had already existed across C Block’s Chinatown.
“That meant we only had to distort and destroy the entire terrain to throw off the timing of your attack. For example, setting off hundreds of thousands of fireworks and starting a fire that entirely changes the terrain!”
(Y-you mean you broke that monster’s unbeatable method?)
“You thought you had perfectly calculated the Rose’s internal arrangement and the Spots’ locations, but we altered them at the last second so your surefire attack won’t work!!”
“I appreciate the vigorous effort,” said the legend as he shook his jacket covered in blade cuts and bullet holes, and raised his Blood Sign which shined with the golden color of a king. “But all you did was seal away my trick homerun. I still have plenty of options left: hitting a double to center left field, stealing bases, a sacrifice fly, or a drag bunt to name a few.”
Yes, it was not that the Thousand Eater could *only* do that.
He had simply chosen the simplest and easiest option from his great arsenal of strategies. And that had been so unbeatable that it had shaped his legend.
It should have been obvious, but Elvast could do more than just that.
And whatever he did, it would be with the greatest, fastest, best, toughest, and strongest accuracy.
(…!!)
“Don’t be ashamed of your fear, Lu-san. Use it to reach for victory!!”
Several White Thorns ricocheted around the half-collapsed shop. A detonated container spun through the air, crashed through one of the shop’s few remaining walls, and tumbled across the center of the Artificial

Sacred Ground, but it changed nothing. Amid all the fierce explosions, flashes of light, and shockwaves, even Kyousuke had difficulty keeping up with the battle. No, he was clearly overheating. He normally could not draw out this much speed and accuracy. He was so desperate to keep up with and snap at the heels of this living legend that his internal skill was dragged out like a car surpassing its limits using the slipstream created by the car in front of it.
Their Materials rose from Regulation-class to Divine-class in no time at all. And their monsters did not stay there as they were seamlessly built up further.
Asp.
Divine-class. Sound Range: Low. Cost: 3.
That extremely venomous snake put its prey to sleep with its gaze and then finished them off with its unavoidable venomous fangs. That precision-guided assassin could be controlled by a curse and sent after the desired target.
Remora.
Divine-class. Sound Range: Middle. Cost: 6.
That monstrous fish would latch onto the bottom of a ship and stop it from moving, no matter how large the ship was. Then that marine grim reaper would bewitch the crew into leaping into the ocean.
Achlis.
Divine-class. Sound Range: Low. Cost: 6.
That quadrupedal holy beast gained divine speed in exchange for never being able to get back up if it fell down even once in the arctic land in which it lived.
Phenix.
Divine-class. Sound Range: Middle. Cost: 6.
That spirit bird was reborn in fire about every 500 years and gained eternal life through its continual rebirth. Legends of that transcender of life were said to be passed down from Egypt but there were no such legends there and its origins were wrapped in mystery.
Pyrallis.
Divine-class. Sound Range: Low. Cost: 8.
That ruler of a volcano crater welling with red-hot boiling copper was a minute insect yet had a dragon’s head, four legs, and beautiful wings.
Bonnacon.
Divine-class. Sound Range: Middle. Cost: 8.
That quadrupedal beast caused chemical burns with a wide spray of its own filth. A single attack could cause damage to an entire theatre.
Caladrius.
Divine-class. Sound Range: High. Cost: 9.
That white holy bird could absorb the illness from someone’s body. That master of purification had the power to swallow evil and would not allow anything else to follow it.

Amphisbaena.
Divine-class. Sound Range: Middle. Cost: 11.
That venomous snake had a head at each end to more efficiently spread the powerful venom brewed in its body. That user of evil intoxication was powerful enough to hold a position opposite that of the god of alcohol.
(H-he's fast!?)
"…"
Kyousuke's vessel's thoughts exploded in his mind. They had easily moved beyond a level that would normally require defeating several summoners and using a Chain to reach.
Their Materials were built up again and again at dizzying speed and a lot of them were monsters described in Pliny's Natural History. It was hard to simply define the strength of the gods, but in the Blood-Sign method where the letters determined everything, these monsters' power could be efficiently drawn out and they could fight on equal or greater footing than the gods of other mythologies.
Elvast Toydream spoke with an almost carefree air as he acted like the leading car inviting the challenger to a realm of abnormal speed down the hellish twists of turns of a mountain road at night.
"What do you think of this world?"
(…)
Kyousuke felt Lu Niang Lan's heart leaping like it was his own. But he did not have time to respond to the question. His thoughts were already past their limit and his hands were moving with no time for his surface thoughts to keep up. He could just barely come up with a list of candidates for his next Material, but he was mostly running on instinct and had no real "track". He felt like he was driving a racecar at 300 kph through a thick forest. As everything flew toward him at great speed, the slightest mistake would mean a head-on collision that split the car down the center.
(The spear-wielding head of the Norse gods who tore out an eye and hanged himself… Sound Range: Low. Cost: 4. The wild head of the Greek gods who cut open his father's stomach to rescue his many brothers… Sound Range: High. Cost: 4. No good. They have too few letters, so they're not well suited to the Blood Sign method! I need to build up more letters to draw out more power. …Oh, I know. Aztec mythology. That great feathered serpent that wraps around a great evil to endlessly create and destroy new worlds! Sound Range: Low. Cost: 12!!)
Kyousuke's thoughts raced so quickly his mind nearly burnt out as he came up with his next move, but even through all that, Elvast had the resources to spare for a conversation.
"Worship the White Queen. Oppose the White Queen. …And to do that, you must master the Summoning ceremony where the White Queen stands at the peak. In the end, everyone is the same. We say so many impressive-sounding things, but we never actually intend to escape the White Queen's

bonds. In fact, we seem to be actively trapping ourselves in that spider web."
(Is that something for a legend to say? How can you say that when you can summon her with your first move and achieve the easiest and greatest victory!?)
Kyousuke accepted his vessel's rage. He was too focused to speak, but Elvast must have read the emotion in his eyes because the man smiled thinly.
"That's right."
The legend exposed the contents of black box that could not be seen on the surface.
"I am trapped by the White Queen more than anyone. And I could not forgive my soul for being so fragile."
(……
……Eh?)
The vessel's confusion nearly filled Kyousuke's thoughts as well.
But even now, time was moving even faster. Almost like a form of superhuman acrobatics.
(That monster…that tyrant…recognized his own imperfection?)
Several White Thorns whizzed around every which way far too quickly for Kyousuke's surface thoughts to follow as Elvast and Kyousuke's Materials left even the Divine-class behind. They were now in the Unexplored-class. These were those who lurked beyond the gods.
Kyousuke summoned an Unexplored-class with a Sound Range of High and a Cost of 14.
The "Gold" Harlot who Serves the Killer Boxes (hs – a – te – ei – yw – az – a – hq).
A gold woman wore a skimpy, jewel-covered dress so gaudy it actually looked cheap. A pile of countless treasure chests and coin bags moved all on its own at her feet. They were all largescale traps that trembled with wicked hunger and contained digestive organs lined with teeth. The Unexplored-class with flowing hair of pure gold leaped toward her prey while those traps followed her.
But Elvast was not concerned. He had an Unexplored-class with a Sound Range of Middle and a Cost of 19: The Lady of "Purple Lightning" that Separates Good from Evil (iu – ao – eu – ei – kub – miq – a – ci – pl). A short-haired girl wearing only the bare minimum of purple cloth sat in a wheelchair. She slowly moved her finger and fought back with beams of light.
"Yes, yes. That is why I had such high hopes for Niang Lan. No, why I envied her."
(???)
"Just as I achieved Award 1000 and was shifting to the other side, she stabbed me. It was perfect! She is a true and undeniable 'human'!! After all, that means she threw out her worship of the Materials and chose to remain

in the human world! No matter how powerful I grew or how much of a legend I saw myself as, I was never able to throw out the Summoning Ceremony, but she turned her back on it and announced she was starting down her own path!!”
Lu Niang Lan’s thoughts could no longer be converted into words.
It was not just that she could not believe the reality before her eyes. She had spent a lifetime building up so much hatred and the foundation below it all was threatening to crumble away. Or perhaps she was ashamed that she had called him a tyrant without ever realizing his true intentions.
That was how transparent Elvast had been.
It was almost as if the surface of that lake had been colored by the crass humans surrounding him.
“Is that why you’re still fixated on Lu-san?”
Words finally left Kyousuke’s mouth.
Kyousuke understood why that long-haired stubbly man would seek Lu Niang Lan as the only person he had ever accepted, but would he really adore her to this extent?
He worked his thoughts while moving even more than before. This may have been the moment when the boy’s skill, drawn out by contact with the legend, began to leave Elvast’s expectations.
“Yes.”
“And now you’re ordering her to redo everything because she didn’t develop in the way you wanted?”
“Yes!!”
He smiled.
The demonic beast named Elvast still had it in him to smile.
“Where else can you find such talent? Even if you searched through all 7 billion people on Earth one by one, where else could you find someone who can pull herself away from the draw of the White Queen!? I continued down the one path but never reached that level. I hated the White Queen more than anyone, but I was never able to throw out the easy and simple power of the White Queen!! So she must hone herself once more. I knew this sword was too great for someone like me, so I cast it into the outside world, hoping it would be honed even further, but now I find it covered in rust in a cheap pawn shop! How can I overlook that treatment? How can I abandon humankind’s last hope!!!???”
(————)
There were no words from the vessel.
The king’s proclamation was probably accurate.
Lu Niang Lan had loathed, hated, and (most of all) feared that man, but Elvast respected her from the bottom of his heart and had – for that very reason – not shown her any special consideration. He had given her a daily life that would have shattered every last pillar supporting a normal person’s personality in order to raise her up to what he considered the ideal form for a woman.

It was true that Kyousuke had not shaken free the bonds of the Summoning Ceremony.
No matter how much he hated the White Queen, he still held his Blood-Sign in the end. Even though he knew a great evil reigned at the peak and it was all done in the palm of her hand.
The one truly worthy of fighting back against the White Queen may have been this beautiful woman who had shaken off the Summoning Ceremony's temptation and lived by her own two hands. It was not Shiroyama Kyousuke or Elvast Toydream; it was Lu Niang Lan. And by inviting her back into this world as a vessel, Kyousuke had rusted her soul.
Lu Niang Lan had fled.
She had fled from Elvast Toydream's hopes and expectation and everything they entailed.
And to gain her freedom and avoid fighting the White Queen, she had stabbed her own king in the back.
Kyousuke understood all that.
And yet he still said it.
"To hell with that."
He did not have time to say much.
He was still only barely hanging on, so even an unwanted twitch of a finger could lead to death.
But he simply had to say this.
"All you're talking about is *your idea of* the ideal Lu Niang Lan. That doesn't mean Lu-san has to go along with any of it."
He shifted his thoughts up to their limit.
He was amazed that he still had a higher gear to shift up to.
"So what if she's 'worthy'. How does that help her conquer the fear?"
No, Kyousuke may not have been opposing the tyrant before his eyes.
He may have been opposing the other person he was linked to.
He may have been opposing the woman who felt absolutely cornered and was hanging her head.
He may have been opposing her to get her to raise her head once more.
"So what if only she can do it? That's no excuse for forcing her through more suffering than other people!! Everyone would be afraid of facing the White Queen head on!! You couldn't do it yourself and you fled to this gentle peace, so you have no right to corner Lu-san. If you don't have the courage to stand by her side to fight with her…no, to tell her it's dangerous and have her stand behind you to protect her, you have no right to say anything about her!!!!!!"
She did not have to become a hero. She did not need to bear the hope of humankind. No one would honor her if she recklessly challenged the White Queen as some kind of human representative.
No matter what anyone said, Lu Niang Lan should have been the kind of normal girl you could find anywhere!!
(Kyousuke…-hyan…)

An especially large container of fireworks exploded nearby.
The store no longer had any walls standing and the area had become nothing but an empty lot. All the while, Kyousuke accurately threaded his White Thorns through the gaps in the container pieces that blew around like scraps of paper in a storm.
(I want to stop him. I want to overcome this peak and reclaim my life!! So Kyousuke-chan, please!!)
“Yes, let’s end his selfishness here!!”
They had already reached the Unexplored-class.
Their Materials all possessed extraordinary power that surpassed the gods of legend. No matter what they chose, it would have enough violent power to end any normal battle.
And Shiroyama Kyousuke’s selection was perfect.
Unexplored-class. Sound Range: Low. Cost: 20.
The “Red-Eyed” Lady who Sees Through all Sin and Calamity (fa – ao – ab – ei – fj – cib – b – du – a – eif).
She was one of the Three who stood near the peak of the Unexplored-class. Her power was devastating even among the monsters of the Unexplored-class. She was the guardian of Government and she wore a partially removed kimono and a one piece swimsuit. She had long hair and she had two horns on her forehead. Her hair was caught in countless giant gears behind her that connected the hair to all destiny like a loom. The words that left her mouth were already definite truth and, if she were to open her coolly closed eyes, it was said she would fix the future in place.
I’ve won, thought Kyousuke.
He had prevented the White Queen’s immediate appearance, worked his way up to the Unexplored-class the old-fashioned way, and successfully reached the Red Lady who was one of the strongest once that greatest evil was removed from the equation. Elvast may have been a living legend, but he could not turn things around now. No matter what Unexplored-class he summoned, Kyousuke could crush him with brute force. There was nothing higher than this. Or so he thought.
But he was forgetting something.
He had indeed prevented her immediate appearance. He had made sure Elvast had to fight the old-fashioned way. But that did not make it impossible for the White Queen to appear.
(…)
The first to catch the “scent” was Lu Niang Lan who had stood by that man’s side for so long.
(What is this? This is the usual “scent”.)
After all…
“Ahh, ahh. This is why I hate myself…”
Kyousuke heard a lamenting voice.
Standing next to Elvast Toydream was one of the Unexplored-class who all had feminine forms.

“No matter what, I always end up relying on the White Queen in the end.”
He had to do it the old-fashioned way.
His greatest cheat had been sealed away and he had needed to start from scratch.
And yet Elvast Toydream had arrived there.
This was not just one of the Three. He had summoned 100 Regulation-classes, 50 Divine-classes, and then arrived at the peak of even the Unexplored-class.
“Ah.”
(Thank you.)
Unexplored-class. Sound Range: None. Cost: 21.
The “White” Queen who Wields the Sword of Unsullied Truth (iu – nu – fb – a – wuh – ei –kx – eu – pl – vjz).
(Kyousuke-chan, you did nothing wrong. Yes, you were just up against too fearsome an opponent.)
“Ahhhh

Elvast gave her a look of wholehearted resentment, but the Queen did not care. A shrewd eye could tell it was really the White Queen who Shiroyama Kyousuke had lost to twice. As if to prove that they were bound by a powerful destiny.
If Elvast did not use the Queen, this might have ended differently.
“Once the 90 second Chain is over, I will disappear into the ether.” The White Queen spoke in a singsong voice. “And I have no interest in anyone other than my brother. You spoke of bonds, puny human. But in truth, I have not done anything. Do not forget that this is no more than your own soul pursuing me.”
She laughed.
“And one last thing. To reward you for distracting me from my boredom, I have a prophecy for you.”
“…?”
“Your wish will soon be granted. Bye☆”
Like a light switch being flipped or like waking from a dream, it all vanished. Containing the White Queen in her body must have been quite a burden because the woman in the shredded riding suit gasped for breath and slumped to the floor. No, she collapsed to her side and passed out.
Elvast did not care.
He had won. And by borrowing that loathsome white power. He was hopelessly strong and, at the same time, hopelessly weak. He wandered through the collapsed shop and approached that woman who had been his one light, who had possessed the possibility of shaking free of the Summoning Ceremony and severing the temptation of the White Queen’s power.
“I…”
The words escaped his lips.
He did not expect anyone to answer him.
“I was so very glad when you stabbed me in the back. I thought I had been saved.”
At first glance, his words may have seemed baffling.
But they were the undeniable truth.
“If it could have ended here, I wouldn’t have had to reach Award 1000 or move to the other side. I would have been able to die a human without becoming a strange Material. So nothing mattered to me more than you, someone who stopped me at the very last second even if it meant stabbing me in the back.”
In the end, he had pathetically survived.
A single blade had failed to stop the legend.
But the bright light he had received then had continued to shine in his chest the entire time.
“I had no one else. Government is just the world’s largest law and order organization. Everyone applauded with fake smiles plastered to their faces as they shoved my fearful back ever onward and upward. The only one with

the strength to stop me, even if it meant staining their hands with blood, was you, Niang Lan.”
As he had wandered the world, he had sought countless replacements. He had crossed paths with many women, made them his vessel, given them great power, and made them a part of his legend. To the majority of the world, those women would have seemed like successes. Everyone would have envied their lives and the women themselves never doubted their own happiness. But every time he saw their smiles, Elvast had sensed something indescribably wrong and cast it all aside. No matter how much power they had, they were the same as the Government aides. They had been pathetic puppets who were too afraid of something to directly face the threat and simply tricked themselves into believing they were happy. From that point, he had already detected that white scent.
“There was no one else…”
He would find her.
He would find that person who had changed so completely since he had last seen her that it was hard to look at her. Like a rusted sword, she had been dragged back into the world of the Summoning Ceremony and now she repeated the same action again and again with empty eyes. Elvast bit his lip, knowing he never should have let her go. He should not have thought it was over when she stabbed him in the back. He should have crawled across the floor and grabbed her with his bloody hand to stop her.
He had been unable to show her his weakness.
That inability may have been the root of Elvast Toydream’s weakness.
“I do not care how much you loathe me. Killing me can be your greatest desire.”
He slowly crouched down.
He held his weakened target of longing in his arms.
She was an obedient doll, a zombie in the original sense of the word, and someone who had received the same shock as seeing her god slaughtered before her eyes. The cowardly man was only able to reveal his feelings to her after tearing her down to this level, but that was why he spoke the undiluted truth now.
“I will hone you again or as many times as it takes, Niang Lan. I will ensure you can reach the choice that someone as weak as me never could.”
He pressed two objects into her back: the Diamond Master Key and the Golden Treasure Chest.
Combined with the ancient map on the brown girl’s back, they would take one to the Founder’s Gallery. Someone who had broken their bonds to the Summoning Ceremony and the White Queen might think up another use for them.
“But if I asked you to do this all again, it would probably break you. So this is a hint and some bait. Use it as you wish and then come to kill me. …If I showed you my own personal collection, I doubt you would be able to break your bonds to me. This distance is just right.”

Elvast respected this woman more than anyone but he spoke softly to her like he was trying to get an unruly child to listen.
But then something else happened.
The sound was actually very quiet. But oddly enough, the strange sound rang endlessly in the long-haired and stubbly man's ears. No, in the center of his chest.
"Ah?"
The sound came from Lu Niang Lan in his arms.
More accurately, from her small fist.
Elvast looked down in surprise and saw her fist embedded in the center of his chest. It was only a few centimeters, but the pressure was devastating. As he watched, her fist smoothly rotated and released all of its built up power.
She did not have her feet planted on the ground and she had not spun her hips to build up power. She had used only the strength of her arm and she had only swung it blindly. It was a truly tiny attack that only used the short distance between her fist and his chest.
But it exploded.
The pressure on his heart sent immense pressure to all of his blood vessels. His sternum and ribs shattered in the blink of an eye and the spine behind his heart snapped with a solid sound. Already covered in blade cuts and bullet holes, his jacket tore and violently burst.
What happened to his heart goes without saying.
"Oh…bh…?"
He forgot to breathe in his surprise, and that may have been the only reason he did not spew blood everywhere.
Lu Niang Lan had lost the Summoning Ceremony. She had received a mental shock equivalent to seeing what she unquestioningly believed to be a god slaughtered before her eyes. For more than 24-hours, she would repeat the same action endlessly and she would be unable to resist outward stimuli, no matter who they came from. So it should have been impossible for her to make an attack after intentionally tricking him into lowering his guard.
So what was this?
What was the meaning of this refreshing barehanded attack that had instantly killed Government Award 1000 without using the Summoning Ceremony in any way?
"Ha ha."
A laugh spilled from his lips.
That breath brought an explosion of fresh blood flowing up from his torn lungs and out his mouth. Even so, Elvast did not stop laughing. In fact, tears of joy welled up in the corners of his eyes.
After losing the Summoning Ceremony, people's normal masks were torn from them to reveal their exposed souls.
Was that what this was?

If Elvast Toydream approached her, she would not hesitate to slay him, even at a subconscious level. The Summoning Ceremony was irrelevant. It was Lu Niang Lan's soul that she had continued to hone all this time.
It did not matter that he had reached Award 1000, that he was the world's strongest, or that he used the Queen.
She did not rely on anyone.
And she used only her own fist to face the enemy blocking her way.
"Incredible. Truly…incredible."
Death assaulted his body as if he had suddenly remembered to die.
He could tell on an instinctual level that there was no saving him. But he felt no fear. He had been shown hope. Even if the rest of the 7 billion people on the planet were hopelessly dyed white and even if all those summoners and vessels spoke of plans to defeat the White Queen and yet relied on her, this woman still existed. She had snapped the thread of temptation. Now that she had demonstrated that, he felt no more attachment to the world. He felt no pain or fear, only the gentle embrace of death that would sever all his bonds.
"Yes."
His entire body was destroyed and he endlessly coughed up blood, but Elvast Toydream embraced humanity's hope even tighter.
He shut his eyes and spoke his last words.
"You really were…an amazing woman."

Facts

- The one who reached 1000 was named Elvast Toydream and he was a direct descendent of the Toy Dream Company's president. He had his own collection separate from the Founder's Collection, had acquired knowledge equivalent to the Natural History's missing entries from a different source, and had successfully created the doll he used for the White Queen's permanent summoning.
- But the Queen's quality was inferior to the Blood-Sign method, so she was weak enough to be killed instantly by Elvast's fist. Unsatisfied with that, he grew somewhat interested in the Natural History's missing entries, hoping to create a more worthy sparring partner.
- The location of the Spots in the Artificial Sacred Ground and the arrangement of the Petals inside the Rose are dependent on the

territorial effects such as the floor of the Artificial Sacred Ground. But the only one capable of performing those detailed calculations was Elvast Toydream who had both a genius intellect and a wild beast’s instincts.

- Elvast reached Award 1000, but he was afraid to pass over to the other side.
- Elvast sought the Founder’s Gallery to promote Lu Niang Lan’s growth without directly giving her any power. He hoped she would eventually complete a technique to kill him and the White Queen.
- Lu Niang Lan is skillful enough to subconsciously kill her target even after losing the Summoning Ceremony. Elvast had always been bound by the Summoning Ceremony, so he left the world trusting in the human strength he felt there.

Ending X-01: A Bouquet for Your Enemy at the Hilltop Grave

“Are you sure you want that?”
“I am not as strong a person as Elvast thinks.”
(Ending X-01 Open 07/09 10:00)
A Bouquet for Your Enemy at the Hilltop Grave

The hellish battle was over.
July 7’s Tanabata was over, so the astronomical observation fair had ended and Toy Dream 35 had been freed from the strict lux restriction. Bright lights would color the night once more, but due to the massive fireworks disaster in C Block, the fireworks festival everyone had been looking forward to had been canceled.
“Honestly, I apparently sent him from this world with my own hand, but it doesn’t feel real when someone has to tell me about it afterwards. It’s like the nightmare hasn’t left my heart.”
Modified China Dress Beauty Lu Niang Lan sounded troubled.
She and Kyousuke were outside the city. They had selected an arbitrary hill, buried Elvast Toydream’s body there, and erected a perfunctory gravestone on top. There was no name carved into it and anyone who happened across it probably would not know what it was. He had been the king of Government, the world police. He had reached Award 1000 and been praised as inhuman, but this was always how a summoner met their end.
The authorities had not been notified of his death and they did not have permission to bury him, making this abandonment of a corpse, but no one would accuse them of wrongdoing. Memories of summoners and vessels vanished from people’s minds once they were out of sight.
Kyousuke spoke as a long, skinny contrail cut by in the blue sky overhead.
“I’ll be ending the contract soon, but what will you do?”
That meant she would at least temporarily return to Award 0.
The unorthodox Awards she had built up without a summoner would be erased in the process of binding and canceling a contract with Alice (with) Rabbit.
But as expected, Lu Niang Lan sounded troubled.

“I doubt I can cut my ties to Illegal now, so even if I’m a little suspicious of you, please grab my hand. If you give me a chance to reach Award 1 or 2 on my own, my memories and awareness will return to normal.”
“Are you sure you want that?”
“I am not as strong a person as Elvast thinks.” The modified China dress beauty sighed and scratched her cheek. “I’m afraid of having the three major powers attack me while I’ve lost my memories. I’m afraid of losing my usual cycle of earning money. I just can’t free myself from the draw of the Summoning Ceremony and the White Queen. I’m even afraid of severing the bonds I’ve made with other people.”
At that point, a rustling sound came from Kyousuke’s hands.
Lu Niang Lan sounded exasperated.
“Did you really bring a bouquet for him?”
“Lu-san. I might be wrong about this, and you can get as mad as you want if I am.”
“What is it?”
With the modified China dress beauty’s permission, Kyousuke opened his mouth again.
“That troubled look on your face. Is that the look you get when you’re holding back tears?”
Nothing more was necessary.
The usually transcendently sexy young woman wept like a child in the summoner’s chest.
This was a secret just between the two of them.
And as Shiroyama Kyousuke held her in his arms, he silently ended the contract.

Facts

- When someone who already has Awards binds a contract with a summoner and becomes a vessel, their previous Awards vanish and are overwritten by the summoner’s Awards. If the contract is ended, their Awards will reset to zero, so this process can be thought of as purifying the vessel of their Awards. However, the reverse (the vessel’s Awards overwriting the summoner’s) is not possible, so there is no way for a summoner’s awards to be purified, returning them to a normal person.
- Lu Niang Lan returned to 0 when the contract ended, but she hoped to quickly acquire a simple Award to return to Illegal. This

suggests she is going against Elvast’s wishes by creating her own bonds.

- Kyousuke did not need to end his contract with Lu Niang Lan since she was already a professional, but he did so anyway. Not wanting to keep her for himself may be the difference between him and Elvast.
- Elvast Toydream died. That is an obvious fact, but let us record it here.

Ending X-02: A Bouquet for Your Enemy at the Hilltop Grave

“Onii-chan.”
“Do you know the story of the World’s Happiest Girl?”
(Ending X-02 Open 07/09 21:00)
When You Place the Rope Around that Alluring Neck

A lot happened and it was time-consuming, so the next thing Shiroyama Kyousuke knew, night had fallen.
He had been left with the Diamond Master Key and the Golden Treasure Chest, so he left Biondetta in his cruiser while he visited Aika’s apartment in Toy Dream 35.
He had already opened the chest and checked inside, but this would be his first time to compare that with the ancient map on Sekurtiti’s back. He had chosen the apartment as their gathering place.
“Onii-chan, you reek of a widow. That old hag was trying to seduce you, wasn’t she!? That kind of niche fetish is too dangerous. I’ll fix you! Look, there’s a little sister in a sexily cute swimsuit right here.”
“I don’t really care.”
“You’re not even going to give me a yes-or-no answer any more!?”
Aika froze in place while lying on her white liger sofa and toying with the string to her swimsuit bottom, but Kyousuke was focused on something else.
“I have no responsibility to tell you anything, but he is a summoner. Every last one of us is insane.”
A girl spoke to them from a tablet’s flat screen, using the shut-in girl’s lifeline: the internet. It was of course Azalea Magentarain. Claude and Elvast might have shown up, but she had been one of the masterminds(?) behind the entire incident.
“You’ve already arrived?” asked Kyousuke.
“Repliglass is good for more than just military purposes. The quality might be reduced for civilian use, but a lot of effort is being put into developing supersonic passenger planes. With 10 hours, reaching South America’s Devil’s Island was a piece of cake. We could have arrived and returned to Japan by now.”

She made it sound like a vacation, but as its name suggested, Devil's Island was historically a penal colony. That penal system had been abolished and it was being transformed into a sightseeing spot, but Government loved its tradition and thus maintained deep roots there.
She could not be set free after everything she did, but it would all be for naught if she was collected by someone like the Colorful Museum or Bridesmaid.
So…
"How's Claude doing?"
"He is trying to hide his embarrassment by running away while we chase him around in swimsuits. …Hold up, 3A! Don't you dare take advantage of this situation. Didn't we agree to surround Claude Onii-sama on both sides to capture him!?"
She had someone to keep an eye on her this time. Now no one had to worry about a scummy group reusing her so easily. Claude was stuck being tossed about by girls, girls, swimsuits, girls, and sometimes an old man, but he had played a role in all this too. He did not get an easy road out.
Kyousuke sighed.
"…Looks like that's all worked out."
"Then we need to get started here," began Sekurtiti with power in her light blue eyes.
He had ended his contract with her in C Block's Chinatown, but she still seemed to remember Kyousuke and Aika. She was a tomb keeper and a Tomb Priestess. She contained a mysticism that predated the Third Summoning Ceremony discovered in 1999, so that may have maintained her memories and awareness.
"Are you ready?"
"Are you?" The brown girl smiled gently and placed a too-skinny index finger on her lips. "I spoke with Aika before you arrived. She told me what she knows about the path you walked to reach this point."
Kyousuke looked grim.
"…That must not have been fun to hear."
"Don't be so sure," replied Sekurtiti in her gold tiara. "Shiroyama Kyousuke. It seems you have happened across a variety of vessels in a variety of incidents and repeatedly said goodbye. That may have been a way to distance them from the conflict surrounding you and it may have been to avoid restricting them by giving them too much."
"…"
"But I do not lose my memories or awareness after the contract has ended. It seems like a small thing, but do not forget it. …We are already in this together."
"…I will bear that in mind."
That answer must have satisfied Sekurtiti because she smiled and reached for her Y-shaped lace decoration. She turned her back and then reached for the knot at her hip for the bandages covering her body.

The apple-sized chest had contained something like a glass panel. But the iridescent glow of the surface when looked at from an angle showed that it had slight bumps carved into the surface. By viewing the ancient map on the girl's back through that special lens, the complex lines were bent according to a certain set of rules and the true image was revealed.
"Nn… Can you…see it?"
Even if it was her back, she may have still felt some embarrassment at having someone staring at her skin. Or perhaps she was worried about the value of the information they had worked so hard to acquire…no, that she had held for so long.
She had held the ancient map, but she did not know what bringing all 3 treasures together would reveal. It was a lot like spending a long time protecting an un-appraised work of art. Of course she was a little worried.
Kyousuke smiled a little at what he saw.
"…Oh, I see."
"Hm? Is something the matter?"
"No, basing it on an ancient map completely fooled me. Sekurtiti, about how old is this map?"
"Even a low estimate puts it at about 2000 BCE. It took many forms back then, such as wall paintings and papyrus, but when the Romans arrived, it started being passed down on the Tomb Priestesses' backs to maintain its secrecy."
"Thanks. That's why I assumed some ancient ruins had been remade into the Founder's Gallery. But the ancient map itself was honestly irrelevant."
"Eh?"
"I'm not saying the map on your back is a fake. I'm sure it has its own meaning. It probably leads to a hidden village that still grows the fruit loved in an ancient dynasty or the location of the treasures stockpiled for the return of the dynasty. In fact, it was probably more convenient for President Toydream if it was real. Even if someone did see the ancient map, they would discover that truth and overlook his gallery."
By placing a new image over the old map, the ultimate destination came into view.
That meant the gallery could be located in a cutting-edge shelter or a high-rise building. By recording the ancient map's design in a computer and comparing it to the image one wanted in the end, the overlapping areas could be removed to create the lens. That would mean combining the lens and the ancient map would reveal the new map.
Thus, the original image data could be anything.
It could be a map to some ancient secret and it could be the supermarket sales flyer from the morning paper.
President Toydream had chosen Sekurtiti because he had known an ancient map like that would be protected more carefully. Or perhaps he had been kindly placing them in the limelight to increase their mystical status.
Either way, there had been no ill will involved.

And when the new image came into view, Kyousuke nodded once more.
“That’s enough. Thank you, Sekurtiti.”
“You’re welcome.”
Sekurtiti kept her back turned as she gently crouched down and picked up the fallen bandages.
“But, um, where did the Founder’s Gallery end up being?” she asked. “You made it sound like it has nothing to do with us and Egypt.”
“That’s right,” readily confirmed Kyousuke. “Aika.”
“…What is it, Onii-chan?”
Sekurtiti looked confused by the sudden change of subject.
But it was not a change at all.
“When did you realize the truth and what weren’t you telling us? The Founder’s Gallery is in this apartment building, isn’t it?”
The brown girl was dumbfounded.
With the golden tiara on her head and the bandages only half wrapped around her body, she froze in place and stared in confusion. But as the leader of the tomb keepers, perhaps the possibility should have occurred to her first of all. After all, her apartment building had only contained fellow tomb keepers and had been mostly turned into a fortress.
And Aika’s attitude did not change.
She continued lying on the 5 meter beast she used as a sofa.
“Onii-chan, do you know the story of the World’s Happiest Girl?”
“…”
“The Toy Dream Company builds amusement parks around the world, but it is said the old man who founded it created the ultimate girl in the greatest fairy tale that surpasses Cinderella and Snow White. But due to certain circumstances, that picture book was never seen by the public.”
“Yes. I’ve also heard rumors that that phantom picture book is hidden somewhere in one of the Toy Dream cities. But I thought there was no basis to any of it.”
There was also all sorts of speculation about Person X who the World’s Happiest Girl from the phantom picture book was supposed to be. Some said she was based on his wife when she was a girl. Some said she was meant to be every girl who visited a Toy Dream amusement park. Some said she was a ritual meant to breathe life into an entirely fictional story.
But Aika had another theory.

“There are two reasons given for why there are no records of that book. The first is that it’s nothing but rumors and never existed. And the other is that all the records were erased.”
“You don’t mean…” muttered Sekurtiti.
She too had experienced the phenomenon of vanishing from people’s minds and memories after going through a certain process.
“Aika Toydream. I wonder what that grandkid-obsessed old man would think if he knew the World’s Happiest Girl was living here as a shut-in.”
That was her identity.
When President Toydream had first held a major press conference and announced he was writing a new story, she was the girl who would have carried the weight of even more adoration and envy than Cinderella and Snow White.
She was the lonely girl whose name would have been known around the world and who would have remained in people’s memories for ages to come, but could no longer be accepted by anyone.
She was the princess who should have been known the world over, but who no one would recognize.
She was a sun that gave off the brightest light imaginable but was blotted out by an eternal eclipse.
Kyousuke had known that becoming a summoner had led her to feel rejected by everyone and that that had led her to give up on going outside. But he had not known it ran so deep. This granddaughter of President Toydream looked different from when she had been little and she had always been covered by a veil so she would not be kidnapped for ransom money.
“I didn’t know what it meant.” she said. “I just wanted to see my grandpa smile. So I wanted to be more and more like the girl in the picture book. I wanted to be able to do anything just by waving around a wand, drawing out a magic circle, and sprinkling a magic potion. No, my vision wasn’t even that concrete. I just wanted to wish my grandpa good luck when I saw him holding that book so adoringly. That was all it was.”
There was nothing he could do.
There was nothing he could say to this.
“By the time I noticed the change, it was too late. I didn’t disappear from people’s minds before reaching Award 100, so I was so excited. If I had turned back right away or stayed in place, I might not have lost everything, but I innocently peered into the depths…”
And that abyss had taken everything from her.
Her face had been blotted out from the world.
“Holding onto my grandpa’s gallery is my form of revenge.”
Aika’s eyes contained a muddiness that Kyousuke had never seen there before.
“Guards are disguised as residents in the rooms around the gallery, but my grandpa and the Toy Dream employees have almost no connection to the

Summoning Ceremony, so no one noticed when I joined them here. Yes, I was depressingly unnoticed."
"Hoarding this gallery was your revenge?"
"Yes, by making sure no one could use it."
Aika slowly narrowed her eyes.
"But it looks like that's over now. …I'm so tired of it all, so this might be the time to end it. Onii-chan, I trust you to not make any girls like me."
And then she closed them.
He had located the Founder's Gallery. The Natural History's missing entries were within reach. But Kyousuke remained motionless for a while.
He was trapped by the delusional idea that shaking free of this distraction would cause the girl to crumble away like sand art in the wind.

The hands of the clock marched on.
Shiroyama Kyousuke and Sekurtiti descended to the floor below the top one.
"Will she be okay?"
"I don't know… But it's my responsibility for cornering her like this. I need to look after her until she can get back on her feet."
They walked down a hallway that was too clean to be lived-in. It felt like a stone chamber and they soon reached the door they were after.
They inserted the master key Aika had given them.
They turned it, grabbed the knob, and opened the door.
"…"
A colorful scene appeared before them. The entire room was full of color. Its value may not have been obvious at first glance. There was a bizarre painting that warped the viewer's mind, a quickly-scrawled out journal that may or may not have followed any kind of pattern, and what might have been a natural hunk of rock or a sculpture. It was so diverse and yet none of it was the same. Some paintings and sculptures of the White Queen sparkled amongst them. It brought immense relief to any who saw it but also it dragged away the soul of any who saw it.
The most dangerous of all were the few scraps of parchment inside a frame. They were the lost pages. The Latin written there could be found nowhere else.
They were the Natural History's missing entries.
They contained truly lost knowledge.
A normal person and even the average summoner would not have known what they meant.
The missing pages alone did not give the entire answer. They were only the final piece needed to decode the giant archive known as the Natural History. These greatly changed one's view of the 37-book masterpiece and revealed the truth of an entirely different world.

And once that knowledge was used to view the gallery again, the treasures gathered from around the world had so many points in common. He had to wonder if this was how it felt for the scholar who had first discovered that the world had once been a single continent.
Kyousuke himself may not have found the answer before his eyes if he had not arrived here with a goal in mind and viewed the scene through that new concept.
The Founder's Gallery contained the entire planet's mysteries gathered and concentrated in one place.
By viewing this, he could find an answer taken from all of human civilization.
What had the president of Toy Dream imagined as he discovered all this around the world?
Transforming these oddities and grotesqueries into picture books and theme parks may have been a form of genius in and of itself.
"Is it here?"
As the manager of a pyramid, Sekurtiti may have had more of an eye for treasure than the average person, but even she seemed overwhelmed.
"Is the answer you seek hidden here?"
"Yes."
Only after speaking did Kyousuke realize that was his answer.
His mind was already elsewhere. The core of his personality was already shifting there. He could barely respond to anything else, but he had to avoid correcting himself here. He could tell his soul was being sucked into a whirlpool.
It was a strange feeling, like seeing a theory or a blueprint taking physical form and actually functioning. Everything here supported him. This spring of infinite and unlimited knowledge told him there was no wish that could not be granted.
Sparks went off in his mind.
It was an explosion.
He abandoned himself to it for a while and then he spoke. Except he may not have been speaking to Sekurtiti.
"Currently, there really and truly is no way of defeating the White Queen. After all, everything that could be used to defeat her – in other words, any of the anthropomorphized versions of the world's laws we know of as the Unexplored-class that could be used effectively against her – have been eliminated."
Sekurtiti frowned as she listened.
It was like a divine oracle.
This was the secret technique of a shrine maiden who entrusted herself to the mystical in a similar yet very different way from a tomb keeper.
"But at the same time, we can't forget about the presence of the Regulation-class. They're often overshadowed by the Divine-class and Unexplored-class, but they have a very interesting trait all their own. Yes, the

Regulation-class is made up of Materials that humans artificially placed in the other world to reach the gods. In other words, *Materials can be freely designed and created by human hands.* Knowing that means a lot."
What was borrowing his mouth here?
This gallery was full of ancient art and documents, but who had edited them, who had gathered them, and for what purpose were they given this form?
"Yes, yes. The Three that rule over the Low, Middle, and High Sound Ranges were defeated and they submitted to the White Queen, but there's still another possibility: putting together a Material from only the Lowest Sound Range, aka the vowels *aiueo*!! That unknown possibility has yet to raise the white flag!! If we could build a Material here…if we could design a new Unexplored-class and embed a brand new 'law' into the world…!!"
Something flowed out with tremendous force.
But Sekurtiti could not stop it at this point.
Once it had started, there was no stopping the oracle.
"We could give the world a new law with which to kill the White Queen!! A law designed to kill her!! Even if we must face the white that rules over all colors, we could still fight back using a colorless Unexplored-class! That's it! That's it!! That's the one and only way of consigning that greatest evil to oblivion!!!!!"
Kyousuke's body went limp, as if a possessing spirit had left him.
He wobbled on his feet and just about collapsed, but Sekurtiti supported him from the side. The world had shed its skin, along with a new concept.
That was obvious even from an outside perspective.
Kyousuke asked the brown girl a question as their skin touched.
"Renge and Higan… Where did the Meinokawa Twins go?"
"They have already left the city. They said there was no room for them in Toy Dream 35 with so many 900 level summoners here, so they wanted to find work elsewhere."
"I see. I see. …That's something of a problem."
"?"
Sekurtiti frowned.
Kyousuke no longer hid anything as he leaned on the girl and continued talking.
"Even if I created an Unexplored-class like I'm thinking, it would be too unique for a normal vessel to handle. That means I need a vessel with special traits."
"You mean…?"
"Yes," announced Shiroyama Kyousuke. "The original Meinokawa Series. The world's oldest Joruri Method, which is a White Queen lookalike that has apparently become an object of worship behind the Meinokawa Shrine. I need the help of Meinokawa Aoi."

With that, the preparations were complete.
Every last hole in the rules of the Summoning Ceremony had been thoroughly examined and the laws of the world had been strengthened until there was no gap wide enough for even a razor to fit through, but Shiroyama Kyousuke had finally found a method to overturn that.
The real fight was about to begin.
It was time for the humans to rebel against that otherworldly ruler.
“Oh, dear.”
But that being giggled somewhere at some time.
She seemed amused as she rolled her arms behind herself, gently bent her back, and slightly accentuated her ample chest.
That pure white yet utterly dark someone spoke with a sneer.
“But will that really work out the way you want, brother?”

Facts

- Aika’s full name is Aika Toydream. As President Toydream’s granddaughter, she was utterly adored and should have become a fairy tale heroine to surpass Snow White and Cinderella, but when she awoke as a summoner, she vanished from normal people’s minds and no one could remember who the World’s Happiest Girl was.
- The Founder’s Gallery was composed of several empty rooms in the apartment building where Aika lives. Since Toy Dream 35 was only completed a few years ago, it may have been moved there from elsewhere. In that case, the data using Sekurtiti’s ancient map would have to have been created by Aika’s network (while posing as the president) after the move.
- In the current world, there is no law (i.e. Unexplored-class) that can kill the White Queen, but that changes if a new one is created and embedded in the world. By expanding on the method of creating a Regulation-class to create an Unexplored-class that can be summoned using only the vowels which exist outside the rock-paper-scissors system, the path will open.
- But this will be an extremely unique Unexplored-class, so a normal vessel cannot handle it. A Joruri Method fully-artificial vessel will have to be fine-tuned for this purpose, so he needs to borrow the knowledge of Meinokawa Aoi, the world’s oldest Joruri Method that is worshiped as a second god at the Meinokawa Shrine.

Afterword

“……”
“……”
(Postscript Open ??/?? ??:??)
Afterword

And that was Volume 6.
This is Kamachi Kazuma.
Now, the theme this time was “a series of unexpected events for Shiroyama Kyousuke”. He usually seems to see through everything, so I decided to change things a bit to show him being tossed around by everything that happened. Both options have their pros and cons, but which one tugged at your heartstrings more?
Some things were revealed in Volume 5’s flashback story and we learned a bit about the world’s mysteries, so I decided to bring out a stronger grade of enemies this time around: the Robo Azaleas that are immune to Incense Grenades, the illogical Offering Team created only to destroy the meaning behind Alice (with) Rabbit, the pirate(?) who crawled back up from hell, and the return of the Award 1000 who was something of a legendary mahjong cheater who could end the match immediately by summoning the White Queen on his first move. They all put Kyousuke in some kind of a bind, but that represented something of an opportunity for him since he was trapped in the dilemma of having no room for growth after reaching the top as the strongest. A summoner does not avoid fear; they absorb it for inspiration. Kyousuke himself said so as far back as Volume 1.
The trickiest one to handle was Azalea because I had to be careful how I brought back a boss character who had already been defeated. I think I did a pretty good job of messing with Kyousuke’s usual calmness and levelheadedness. I’ll leave it to all of you to judge how I did with the boss characters.

The White Queen’s trick this time was rather plain since it was only used to show how impressive the Award 1000 was, but I think the most frightening thing about her is how she always smiles even when her chest is pierced or she is sending a deadly attack toward her beloved. Plus, she made the ominous prophecy of “your wish will soon be granted” just before leaving.

She did not appear much, but I worked to ensure she left an impression when she did.

This volume also included some irregular events for this series: Kyousuke changing vessels partway through, the guest vessel not losing her memories at the end, etc. Not everything that is unexpected needs to be a bad thing for Kyousuke. What do you think?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Ikawa Waki-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. …This one ended up with a sizable cast, didn't it? And they were switching from yukata to bandages, sometimes had a key hanging from their neck and sometimes didn't, and had other small differences that had to make it more confusing. Thank you very much for sticking with me yet again.
And I give my thanks to the readers. What did you think of the first volume after returning the timeline to the present? Kyousuke is making progress after facing his past. The Queen wants to reach for happiness even if it means psychological regression. I hope you are looking forward to the rest of their battle.

And I will end this here.

I put a Meganeura in this one, so maybe it's about time I went with a dinosaur.
-Kamachi Kazuma

?

In the ocean near Toy Dream 35, a large Blue Whale Repliglass submarine waited on the surface.
As the unaffiliated craft calmly stuck its head above the water, someone held a fishing pole in one hand and a satellite cellphone in the other.
“Yes, yes. They were defeated. Azalea and…ugh, The Saint too? I can’t believe this. Even if they were only the hopeful new faces in Bridesmaid, they were definitely the mental support of the group. It might be best to tighten down on the internal investigations to prevent anyone from leaving. The last time I was gone, our base was attacked and 3A was taken. We are critically shorthanded.”
Despite how serious the report was, the person did not sound at all motivated.
But that may have been the correct answer for that person in a white coat. It was easy to let idealism, willpower, and emotions get the better of you, but would anger over a companion’s death really lead to a good answer? Would letting the blood rush to your head really awaken something inside you? If not, you needed to remain as coolheaded as possible when the unexpected occurred. If that led to a loss of popularity, it was the environment around you that was wrong. In that case, the people around you needed to be actively purged, the fat needed to be cut away, and the group needed to be reorganized.
“Yes, yes. Damn, so it’s too late then. Maybe I should have gone there myself, if this is how it was going to turn out. But, well, I had something else to take care of. Still, though.”
A nearby hatch opened and a small girl poked her head out like a mole. She had braided blonde hair and a slender, slender body of around 10 that was so tiny it looked like it would snap if you touched it. She wore a straw hat and a white school swimsuit and she began doing pre-exercise stretches. Was she planning to dive into the ocean while someone was trying to calmly fish? The white coat person looked back and forth between the girl and the end of the fishing line.
“Well, at any rate, even if we have to give up on those two…we can’t just sit idly by. Let’s begin. We have to, don’t we? Luckily, I still have *an excellent vessel* in stock, so I’ll head out myself. I’ll make my debut. Bye bye.”
The lab coat person hung up.

They grabbed the top of the straw hat to stop the white swimsuit girl's stretches. Fish or swim? They each grabbed at the other's face as they fought over that, but then they smiled and reached a conclusion.
"Let's go meet Shiroyama Kyousuke, just like I promised. Okay, *Olivia Highland*?"
"Yeah!! I want to meet Onii-chan right away, Doctor S. Eh heh heh. She returned my lost memories and gave me this chance to meet Onii-chan again. The White Queen really is the most wonderful Unexplored-class, isn't she!?"

Mitou Shoukan://Blood-Sign — Volume 06

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The Unexplored Summon://Blood-Sign

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